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Rainbow 6 Patriots

This entry in the legendary shooter series sheds the genre's clichéd Middle Eastern or Russian enemies in exchange for a threat closer to home. Rainbow 6 Patriots conveys the impact of terrorism not only through the eyes of the elite operatives, but also has players step into the roles of the terrorists themselves and the civilians caught in the crossfire.

By Matt Bertz

For the Sake of Argument



ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

I've never been shy about pointing out things that annoy me, and like any good loudmouth, I get proven wrong on a frequent basis. It comes with the territory.

The Nintendo Wii? From day one the controller and lack of HD graphics annoyed me. Do I love some of the games on the system and think it's imperative that a gamer own one to play all the greats? Without question, because Nintendo is one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – game developers in the world. I know I won't be the only gamer blowing the dust off a Wii, ejecting a copy of Super Mario Galaxy 2, and smiling through the lingering cloud as The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword slides into the disk drive.

Do I think I was wrong about Nintendo Wii? Probably, as the system has dominated sales this generation and entertained tens of millions of gamers around the globe. But at the same time, in the last year the excitement around the system has slowed to a crawl. Some of it can be attributed to the announcement of Wii U, but I think there has been some fatigue at the gimmicky control system.

Nintendo isn't the only company guilty of mistakes. Xbox 360s still break around this office and at friends' homes like drunken, blind mice built them. Can anyone turn on a PlayStation 3 without having to install an update? Of course, some people's original Xbox 360s are still chugging to this day, and if you play PlayStation 3 every day, there must be at least be one or two days a year without an update (I kid, I kid).

At the end of the day, all these complaints and criticisms are just part of being a gamer. Complaining about games, game machines, developers, publishers, game magazines, CEOs, and websites are part of the fun. If we didn't have arguments about review scores and whose system was better, what would we talk about or use to show the depth of our nerd cred? Gaming is all about the fun when the machine is on, and when the machine is off, arguing about games is sometimes as entertaining as playing the games themselves.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



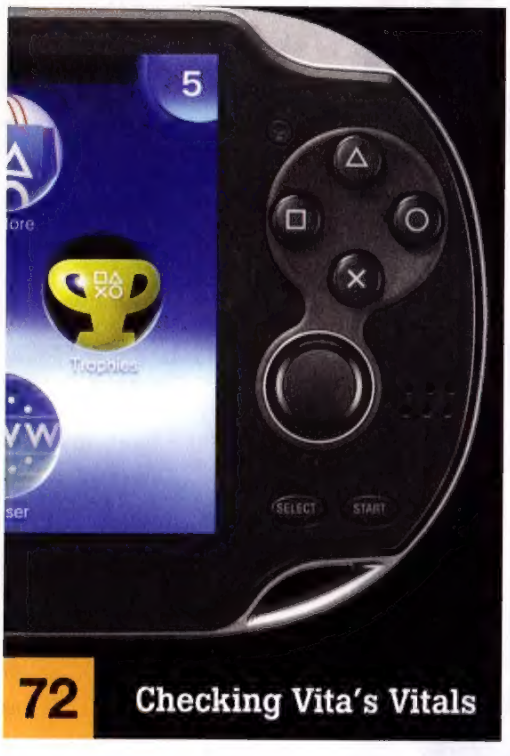
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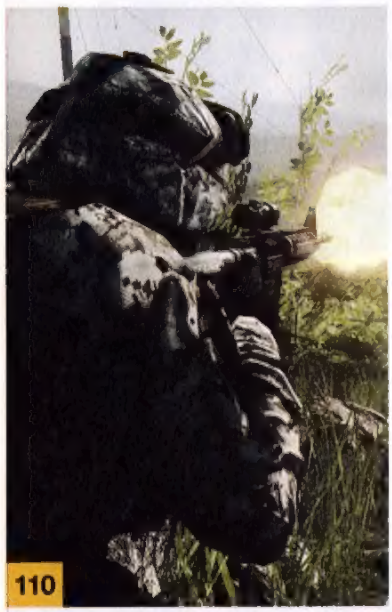
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We dive head first into Mass Effect 3's rewarding multiplayer, explore the first several hours of Final Fantasy XIII-2, and check in on one of gaming's unluckiest anti-heroes in Max Payne 3.

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We explore the first game by Harvey Smith, the game-maker who went on to play key roles in the creation of Deus Ex and the upcoming Dishonored. Learn what happens when you mix robot dinosaurs with an RTS.







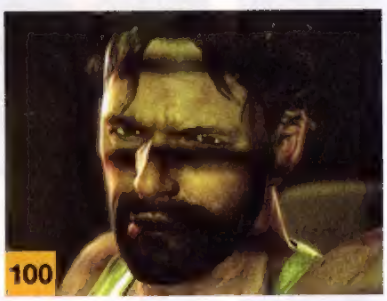






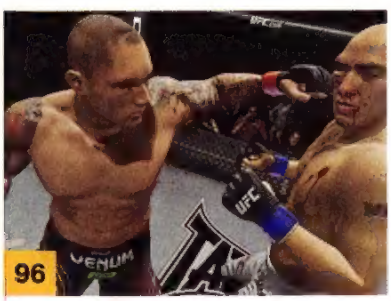














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feedback



This month in Feedback, readers discuss the nature of the video game beta, question our currency converting skills, describe their video game-inspired Halloween costumes, and praise our Zelda anniversary coverage while simultaneously accusing us of hating Nintendo.

Happy Birthday, Zelda

I don't think I've ever enjoyed reading an article more than issue 222's "The Legend of Zelda: 25 Years of Magic and Master Swords." Seeing some of my favorite games again, reading some of your reactions to the ones I missed, and glimpsing where Link and Zelda are going next was easily the highlight of my day.

Jared Williams
via email

I have been a subscriber for a little more than a year and I haven't seen a single Nintendo cover story. When I opened my mailbox, I almost leapt for joy when I saw the cover. It was Link! I went in my house, and unleashed my excitement by literally dancing around my table and reading the magazine (at the same time). Since Game Informer didn't really cover Mario's 25th anniversary, I wasn't expecting you guys to cover Zelda's. But to my surprise, you not only covered a great game that's coming out this year, you did stories on all of the Zelda games. Game Informer, you have made many Nintendo (and Zelda) fans very happy.

Drake Smith
via email

After naming The Legend of Zelda as the best game of all time in issue 200, how could we not celebrate Link's monumental anniversary? Be sure to check out even more Zelda festivities at gameinformer.com/zelda, including videos of Skyward Sword in action and a full playthrough (with our commentary) of the original Legend of Zelda on NES.

You Can't Please Them All

Game Informer, we need to talk. All of a sudden you have been jumping on the Nintendo bandwagon because of their new systems and games, whereas before you have been completely mean to Nintendo. Need I remind you that Nintendo started everything! You have upset me with your Nintendo hating magazine for the last time! Then all of the sudden in your latest issue you claim that you want to honor Link and his 25th anniversary! Bull crap! It is not fair for all of the Nintendo fans to have to put up with your utterly disappointing magazine. Maybe if you were to be original and get some class, we the Nintendo fans would respect you and your magazine.

Nathan Everson
via email

Congratulations, Nathan. This is one of the most confusing letters we have ever received from a reader. We truly hope you figure out what it is you want from life.

Gorilla Math

I enjoyed last month's article entitled "Currency Converter: Calculating Video Game Exchange Rates" (issue 222). As the instructor of an anthropology class at the University of Colorado at Boulder, however, I must point out a glaring error in the description of your mathematical conversion, which you stated "might seem magical to our Mesopotamian ancestors." The ancient Sumerian city-states of Mesopotamia were known for their advanced economy and adept merchants. In fact, cuneiform – one of the first forms of writing on Earth – was developed by the Sumerians to record economic transactions. That being the case, they would not be the least bit flummoxed by the mathematics of your conversion. Otherwise it was a great article. Keep up the clever writing and, when used appropriately, archaeological references.

Guy David Hepp
Boulder, CO

My girlfriend pointed a flaw in issue 222's Currency Converter article. Concerning Fallout 3's Nuka Cola caps, you fail to take into consideration the fact that drinking a Nuka Cola gives you one cap back.

Brian S. Hudson
via email

It appears both the ancient Mesopotamians and Brian's girlfriend are better at math than we are. Factoring in the bonus Nuka Cola cap, the U.S. debt is actually only 202 trillion caps – not 210 trillion, as stated in the article. We're that much closer to post-apocalyptic financial solvency!

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com



Better With A Friend

I just wanted to thank you for the article about great co-op games (Co-Oped Up!, issue 222). I have been searching for a few weeks for games that I could play with my girlfriend. She recently has been begging to kick my ass in video games; she already beat me in Mario Kart on the Wii so I thought I would try to research some games that we could play together. Thanks to your team of hardworking editors, I now have a great list of games I can play with my girlfriend.

Jai Gordon
via email

I want to thank you for your Co-Oped Up! article. I laughed when I saw it; not even three weeks ago, I told my husband we needed to get a dungeon crawler we could play together. It's great you guys are acknowledging that often co-op is more enjoyable than solo or competitive multiplayer, or at the very least makes decent games better. We will definitely keep this list in mind the next time we go game shopping!

Rachel Marshall
via email

Damned If You Do...

I'm sure you have already received numerous emails about the Battlefield 3 beta. I'm tired of listening to gamers complain about the most obvious and expected problems (i.e. glitches and poor graphics) from a 1.3GB download for the Xbox 360, instead of reporting useful changes to developers to improve the game. I have a list of real problems that I will save for EA. Even though I am pleased with the beta I'm dissatisfied with how unreliable EA's servers are. If this is happening in the beta what's the likelihood there will be server problems with the actual game's multiplayer?

Isaiah Drungo
Hampton Roads, VA

We couldn't agree more. Gamers need to understand that a beta is for the developer's benefit, not the players'. Betas exist so that participants can help test unfinished code and server capabilities, not to entertain impatient gamers with early access to the final product. We tip our hats to players who take the beta process seriously and provide useful feedback to developers instead of incoherent rants. As for EA's server woes: To see if DICE addressed the problems that emerged in the multiplayer beta, read our Battlefield 3 review on page 110.



Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Would I get arrested if I ran through your office in a panda suit?"

Probably.

"What are the chances that Game Informer could send me my own Xbox 360 and use that as a tax write-off?"

Poor.

"How do you go about asking publishers/developers to remake/re-release a game? Especially when the company is defunct."

That's what wishing wells are for.



Most Likely To Succeed

I'm a 15-year-old girl gamer who enjoys intense games with intriguing storylines and great graphics, like Red Dead Redemption and Assassin's Creed. However, my mother has a problem with my gaming. Every time I spend more than an hour on my PS3, she chastises me about concentrating on my schoolwork. The thing is, I have a 3.83 GPA, I'm a district representative of my high school, I'm class president, and I'm preparing to take college classes to get my associate's Degree by graduation...and I'm also rookie of the year on my softball team. How can I convince her that I'm on top of everything; I just want some downtime?

Katniss Everdeen
San Francisco, CA

This would normally be the time where we would tell you to quit complaining and listen to your mother, but it sounds like you have your schoolwork under control. Instead of waiting for her to yell at you in the middle of a gaming session, try negotiating a weekly schedule for when and how you want to use your free time beforehand. If that doesn't work, take a cue from your pal Altaïr and hide in a hay bale to escape your next confrontation.

We Get It!

Countless readers wrote in to complain about Link's right-handedness on the cover of issue 222. We are not responsible for choosing how Link wields his sword. If we were, we'd make him swing the sword with his foot.

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"on gun game on call of duty if you get in a tower and wait you'll come in first almost every time ;)"

GI SPY





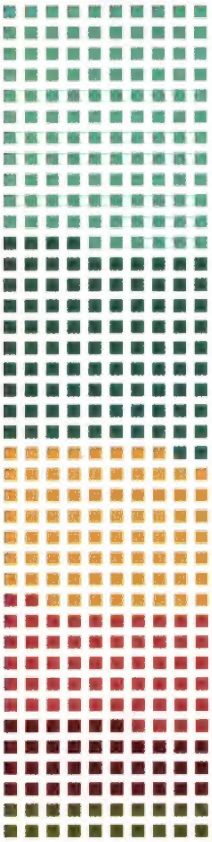


CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Chair's Laura Mustard sent in this picture of her daughter Abby playing the Xbox 360. Based on her expression, we're guessing she's playing Dark Souls. **(Center)** Kyle has only been at GI for a few months, but that hasn't stopped him from torturing his newborn baby with his homemade Portal test chambers. It's a cruel welcome to the world for Claire Chell Godbold Hilliard. **(Right)** In an effort to impress Fatshark's Martin Wahlund and Gunnar Johansson, Bryan showed them the fanciest feature at the GI office: our spiral staircase. They were not impressed.

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- Zelda Anniversary Coverage **33%**
- Halloween Costume Plans **19%**
- Resistance 3 Review Complaints **14%**
- "Battlefield Is Better Than Modern Warfare!" **11%**
- "Modern Warfare Is Better Than Battlefield!" **10%**
- Co-Oped Up! Praise **8%**
- Southern Gamer Supporters **5%**

Question Of The Month:

Which video game enemy scares you the most, and why?

Trick Or Treat

In issue 222, we asked readers what video game character they were going to dress as for Halloween. For the first time in our Question of the Month replies, there was no consensus; everybody wants to dress up as someone different. Here are some of the responses.

Cole MacGrath, hands down. The costume is easy to make, cool looking, and the people that were too cool to dress up won't walk around calling you a fruit pop for going as somebody like Link (no offense to Link, of course).

Jason Hensley

I plan to dress as Link for the third year in a row. Not only is he my favorite character, but we also have a lot in common. For instance, guessing from his taste in fashion, we both have the same favorite color. However, it is somewhat humiliating when people guess that you're Zelda.

William Harline

I'm going to try to get some friends to go as Angry Birds. Then, when we go trick or treating, we're not going to ring the doorbell. We are just going to sling-shot ourselves into people's houses and raid their candy.

Kyle Piklor

If I were to go out on Halloween as a video game character, I would not go out on October 31st. I would, in fact, wait until November 31st and dress up as Slowpoke from Pokémon. It seems like a really good idea and I think people would like it. I certainly would enjoy all the month-old candy.

Greg Irvin

I am not very creative, nor do I have an immense amount of disposable income to spend on an extravagant endeavor. That's why I decided to go with a costume that has great visual appeal and instant recognition: my Xbox 360 Avatar. Quite a handsome fellow.

Gary V. Walters



Do Not Resuscitate?

As a fan of the original Syndicate, I am somewhat doubtful that the FPS direction of the new title will capture the strengths of the original. Syndicate of old gave you absolute control of your corporation and an empowered feeling that you were conquering the world. Performing R&D and upgrading your troops while worrying about having enough cash coming in was a great combo. I don't know if being an FPS foot soldier in a narrative-driven story is going to capture the same magic. It will just feel too small, and too derivative of all the other FPS titles out there.

Tom Knowles
San Luis Obispo, CA

Both EA and 2K Games have their work cut out for them with the upcoming revivals of Syndicate and XCOM, respectively. All the flashy gunplay in the world won't capture the essence of what made these beloved franchises so fascinating to gamers, unless it's complemented by a deep layer of strategy. So far we've seen the brawn of both reboots; we're still waiting for the brains.

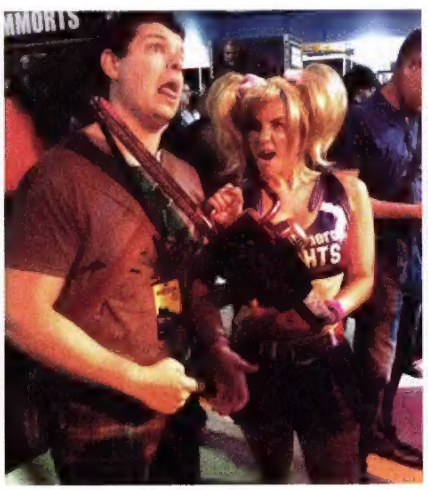
GI SPY

continued from page 7

(Left) Ben looked a little emasculated when he met up with former GI editor-turned-Gear Meagan Marie. **(Center)** Ben's encounter with this Lollipop Chainsaw cosplayer didn't go very well, either. **(Right)** Ben Hanson really wanted to start his own *West Side Story* dance gang with Harmonix's Annette Gonzalez and Dance Central 2 choreographers Ricardo Foster Jr. and Chanel Thompson, but they thought the idea was lame.

continued on page 10







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UBISOFT

gallery



1 Adam Darby We're guessing Ico would be a lot easier if you just had to throw an arm from room to room. **2 Austin Taylor** The Mushroom Kingdom's females get a makeover, except Toadette who's still a dumb talking mushroom. **3 Charlie Donkin** A family portrait of Arkham Asylum's villainous cast, plus a hidden Riddler trophy. **4 Shelby Robertson** Not sure why the guy with the pro wrestler body needs two Volvos worth of metal to protect him, while the skinny female is fine with two square feet of tank top. **5 Mark Eddy** No use in trying to throw this entry away, because we know it'd come back even if we threw it into the sun.

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best dam art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

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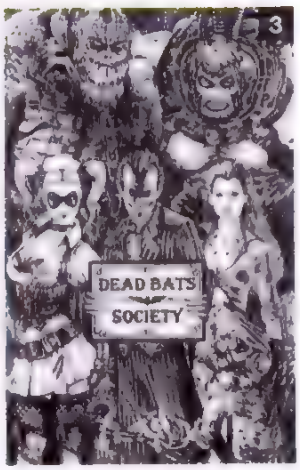
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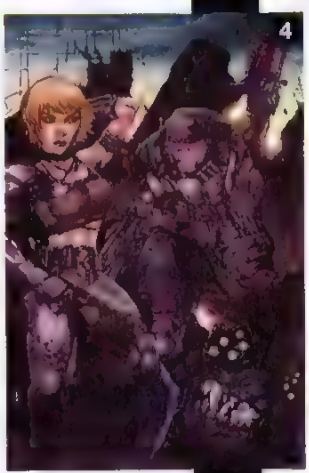
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WINNER

This month's winner will receive a copy of Assassin's Creed: Revelations on the system of their choosing.

I SPY

continued from page 8

(Left) Nintendo's Kit Ellis and Bill Trinen wisely wouldn't let Dan into the building, but they did take this picture with him by the sign outside. **(Right)** After checking out Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time, Tim and Sanzaru Games' Bil Van Ness, Mat Kraemer, and Glen Egan decided to pull their own heist. It did not go well.





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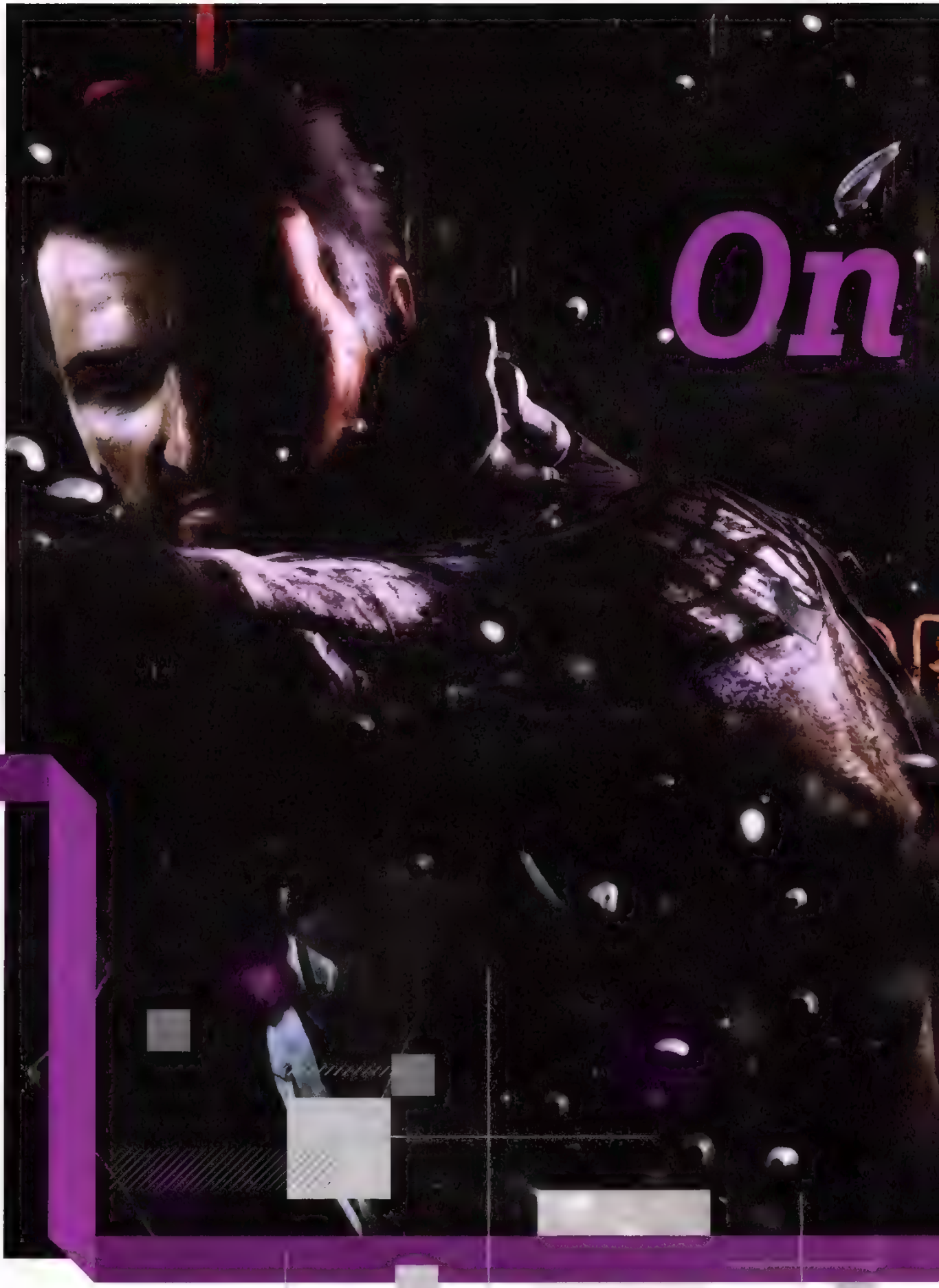
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The Horizon

Next-Gen Consoles Coming Into Focus

THE CURRENT CONSOLES are experiencing a particularly fertile period with so many great games coming out, but concrete signs point to both Microsoft and Sony preparing their next home consoles for release in the upcoming few years. Not only are companies like Epic talking about the timetables for their middleware engines for the next generation, but more and more chatter is surfacing from publishers and developers about projects for the upcoming round of home consoles.

Epic practically defined the software of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 thanks to its ubiquitous Unreal Engine 3, which was used by many companies to great effect. Naturally, everyone is waiting on Epic's next tech, the aptly named Unreal Engine 4 (shown previous page), to see how it may define next-gen systems and games. In March at GDC, the company unveiled the engine through its Samaritan demo – a gorgeous introduction to what Epic thinks may be possible when the PlayStation 4 and so-called Xbox Next come out. The demo showed off the engine handling a number of jumps forward in graphical features such as lighting, reflections, depth of field, and much more.

> We have some intelligence to go on that, by early 2014, we're pretty sure there'll be at least one next-generation console on the market.
>
> – David Grijins, Avalanche New York studio manager

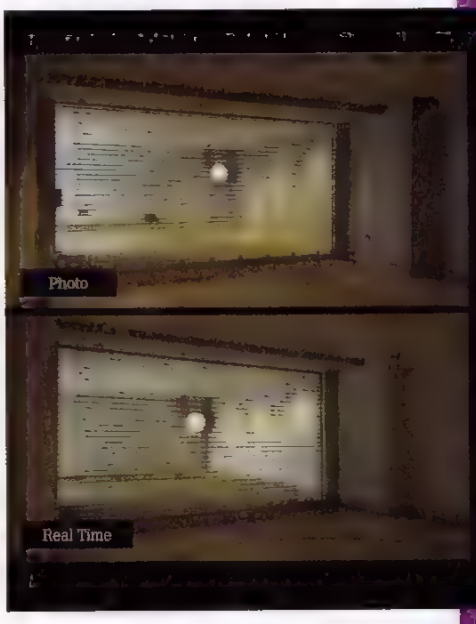
Epic founder, CEO, and regular programmer Tim Sweeney said in an interview with IGN that he spends 60 percent of his day on research work for the engine and the next round of consoles. In particular, he says the current challenge Epic faces in regards to the new engine as compared to Unreal Engine 3 is scaling up its usage of multiple cores in real-time. Sweeney says he believes the engine will probably be ready in 2014 – which is perhaps not so coincidently when some in the industry think PlayStation 4 and Xbox Next will come out.

Avalanche Studios (Just Cause 2) says it has a triple-A project lined up for 2014, and we're sure it isn't the only one. "We obviously talk to everybody, and everybody talks to us," Avalanche New York studio manager David Grijins told *Edge* magazine a few months ago. "We have some intelligence to go on that, by early 2014, we're pretty sure there'll be at least one next-generation console on the market."

Industry analyst Michael Pachter has also said that he doesn't see the PS4 in particular coming out until then. Pachter thinks the upcoming 2012 release of the Wii U system by Nintendo isn't really a kickoff of the next-gen systems, but rather a catch up to the current standards. Nintendo's position is an interesting one. While it's getting a jump on the competition with the release of the Wii U, the question remains whether Nintendo is putting its already contentious third-party relationships in jeopardy by asking those development studios to make software for a 2012 console when they could be setting their sights on the historically more lucrative pastures of Microsoft and Sony's platforms.

On the first-party side, Microsoft already has employee profile listings for some of its personnel. For instance, Jeff Faulkner is listed as the "Xbox next-gen creative director," and Patrick Corrigan is a graphic designer working on "groundwork and integration for branding elements for next-gen Xbox." There are also reports of developers like Lionhead, Rare, Turn 10, and Remedy working on titles for the successor to the 360. Furthermore, *Develop* cites a source that says Sony's first-party studios are starting early development on PlayStation 4 titles. Although it's likely that the tech specs for both the next Xbox and PlayStation are not yet dialed in, Sony and Microsoft are consulting with studios to get their opinions about the needs of software developers. Hopefully this all translates into stronger launch lineups and allows these systems to hit the ground running.

That companies are gearing up for the new systems is no surprise. Whether it's 2014 or 2013, just about everybody thinks that the next-gen home consoles will be out in the next few years (and let's not forget the Wii U in 2012). As the middleware engines that will form the backbone of development for most studios start to form and first-parties start production, things are starting to take shape. Although a 2012 release for anything other than the Wii U would be a shock, we expect either Sony or Microsoft to use next year's E3 to say something about their future plans – if only to suck some air out of Nintendo's party.



Square Enix Sheds Light On The Next Gen

Recently in Japan, Square Enix held an event to demo its next-gen, DirectX 11-supported Luminous engine. As you can see in the above comparison picture, the company is going after photorealism with this engine that Square Enix says can be used for any type of game. A video of this same environment looked just as nice, and Square says that the photorealistic effect is achieved through the modeling of real-life light, mimicking the physical parameters of real objects, and procedural animation techniques. Of course, there's not a lot going on in the Luminous demo, so it's hard to say how it would handle multiple AI routines, real-time lighting and shadows, etc.

Square Enix is confident in what Luminous can do for its games (there are currently no plans to license the engine). Yoshihisa Hashimoto, the company's chief technical officer, predicts that the engine will lower a game's development cost by 30 percent as well as decrease development time.



Sony is considering a way to let PSP gamers play titles they already own on the upcoming Vita, which doesn't use PSP's proprietary UMD discs. This would likely involve some sort of download voucher program for a small price. Before you get your hopes up, however remember that Sony promised a similar thing for PSPGo owners, but declined to do it for "legal and technical" reasons. The handheld comes out on February 22.

the Good

Capcom announced the Devil May Cry HD Collection for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 for an early 2012 release. It includes the original DMC, DMC 2, and DMC 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition, and is priced at $39.99. Not a bad price for two good games!

the Bad

Enjoy Mark Hamill as the voice of the Joker in Batman: Arkham City, as he says it's the last time he'll play the iconic villain. "Hello! Goodbye Joker," tweeted Hamill. "I've enjoyed every minute behind the wheel of the Crown Prince's crazy car – I'm going to miss him more than I can say!!"



Sony's PSN and Sony Online were attacked again, as hackers attempted the unauthorized sign-in of 93,000 accounts. Sony says credit card info wasn't at risk, but it has locked those accounts, notified those affected, and advised them to change their passwords.

and the Ugly

Despite developer id Software's obvious chops, the PC version of Rage is marred by texture pop-in and other issues caused by the wrong drivers being released for AMD/ATI and Nvidia graphics cards. While a patch was issued, the situation caused John Carmack to call the crisis a "clusterf—."

Quotable

"We'll probably cancel it."

Glen Schofield

of Sledgehammer Games is realistic about the fate of the studio's third-person Call of Duty project, in an interview with MCV.



grand theft auto V

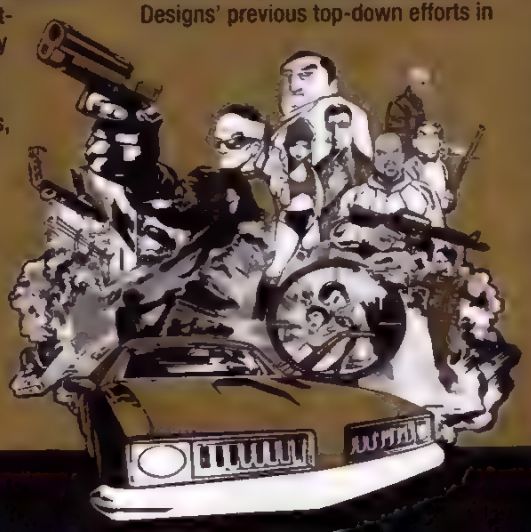
Announced

Confirming what we all knew was coming, and starting all kinds of new speculation, Rockstar somewhat quietly announced Grand Theft Auto V. At the time of this writing, no details about the game were available, but we've no doubt that it will continue its open-world blueprint and be replete with all the crime, craziness, and cash you've come to expect from the franchise.

ROCKSTAR ALSO CELEBRATES GTA III'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY

A lot can change in a decade, and a lot has because of Grand Theft Auto III. Rockstar Games is celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the seminal title with new versions of the game on iOS and Android devices, as well as some goodies for fans.

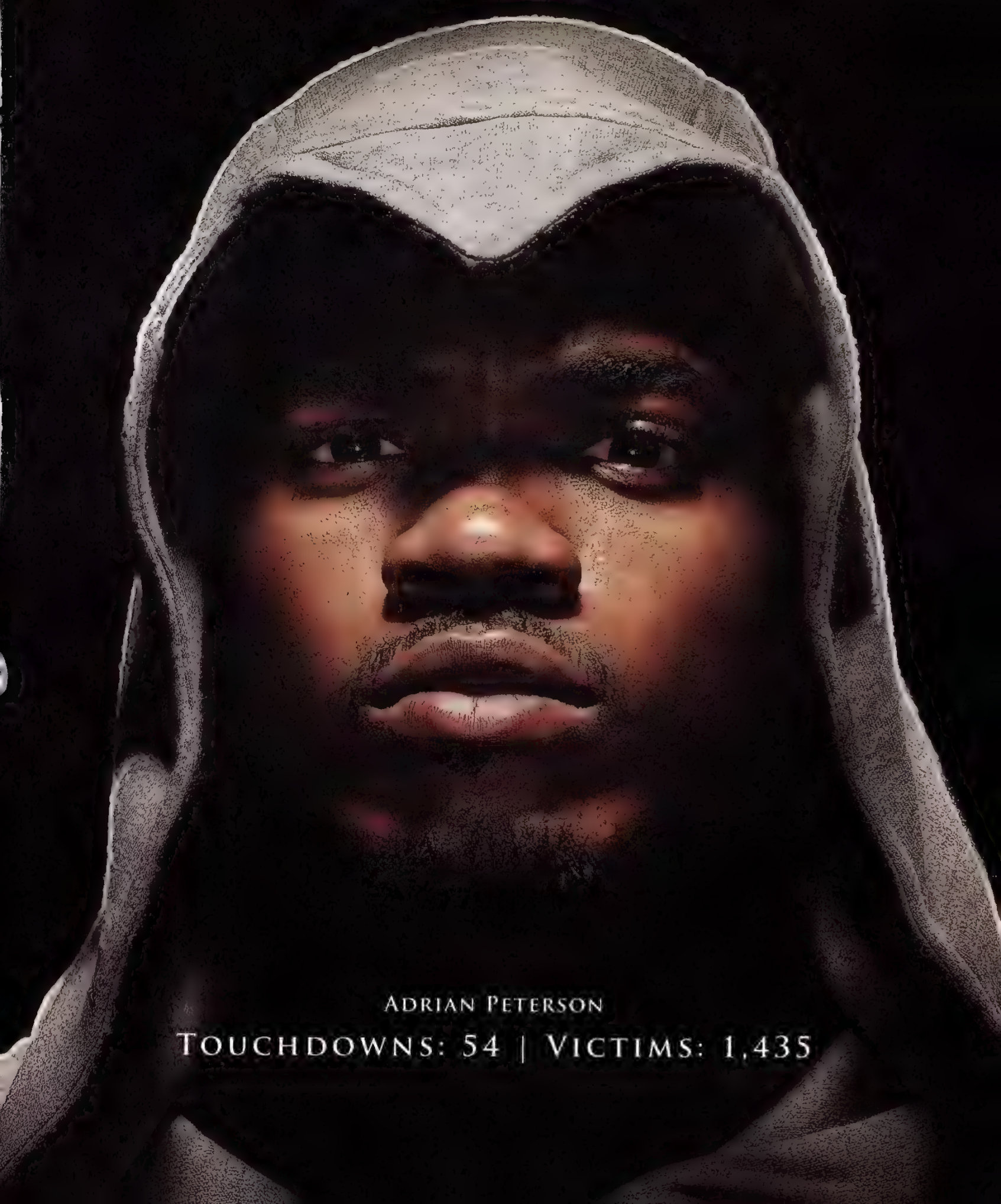
Grand Theft Auto III wasn't the first to do what it did – like creating an open-world adventure that mixed genres and offered a multitude of possibilities – but it's the one that did it the best and became loved by many millions of people the world over. GTA III greatly expanded DMA Designs' previous top-down efforts in the franchise (the studio would later morph into Rockstar North after the release of GTA III) with its ambitious gameplay. The title also had top-notch presentation and delivered a number of intangible hooks such as its cultural acuteness, soundtrack, voice acting, and much more that put it a clear step above.



The iOS- and Android-enabled versions of GTA III come out sometime this fall.* The release has some slight graphical improvements, and Rockstar says that the list of devices supported will expand after launch.

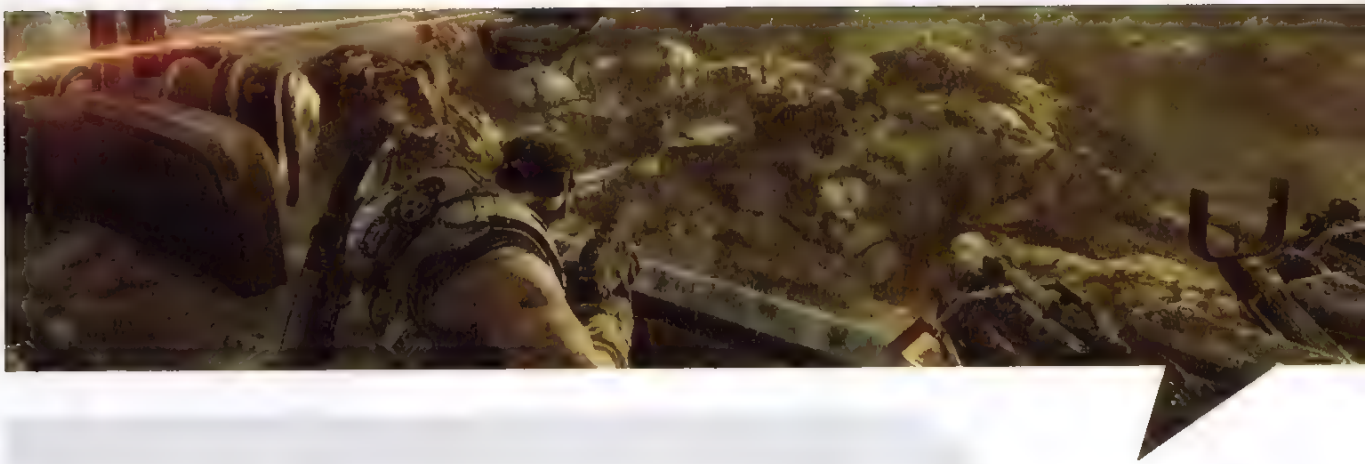
Before then, Rockstar is offering a few homages to the game and its fans in its online store. Collectibles manufacturer Sideshow has created a limited edition 1:6 scale figure of GTA III's protagonist Claude for $149.99. The figure comes with his original attire as well as a Liberty City Prison jumpsuit and a variety of weapons to take care of whatever comes his way. Rockstar is also offering 12"x18" premium-grade cover stock lithographs of Claude, 8-Ball, Kenji, and Misty for $25 each. Only 500 of these have been made and they are hand-numbered, so get them while they're still available at www.rockstarwarehouse.com.

*Apple iOS Devices: iPad 2, iPhone 4S Android Phones: Droid X2, HTC Evo 2, LG Optimus 2X, Motorola Atrix, Samsung Galaxy S2 Android Tablets: Acer Iconia, Asus Eee Pad, Motorola Xoom, Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1


Adrian Peterson
Touchdowns: 54 | Victims: 1,435

afterwords

Gears of War 3



The endcap to Epic Games' blockbuster trilogy is out in the wild, and many fans have finally seen the end to Marcus Fenix's story – though the online carnage is only beginning. We asked Epic design director Cliff Bleszinski and director of production Rod Fergusson our burning questions about locker room dialogue, post-credit surprises, and the realities of modern DLC development.

Were you able to take the story where you wanted to in the end?
Cliff Bleszinski: I feel pretty darn happy that we've answered many, many questions that people have had about the series, and to be frank, not completely answered everything. Because I think people want to know everything, they say they do, but when they find out everything, it's not everything they thought it would be in their head or the sense of mystery sometimes goes away. So, am I happy? Am I satisfied? Quite.

Rod Fergusson: We never sat down and planned the trilogy from beginning to end and said, "Here's our three games with the story that's going to connect them all." With each game we came up with a new story and tried to have it tie in and make sense and have continuity. So being able to have a story that actually has a beginning, a middle, and an end is what's satisfying to me.

The locker room machismo seems toned down in Gears 3. Was that intentional?
RF: It was a mixture of two things. One, it was partly intentional to calm it down a little bit. The other is just having the influence of another writer. All three games have been written by different writers, so they each bring their own sensibilities to it. Karen, coming from a novel background, she writes in a different way from how a video game writer would traditionally write

CB: When we sat down to build the first game, we never sat down and said, "Hey Rod, what's up dude? Hey bro, let's make the coolest dudebro game."

RF: But we did. [laughs]

CB: Yeah, we pat each other on the ass every time we leave a meeting. It's like a football locker room. [laughs] No, the funny thing is that we all love musicals.

When we looked at combat videos of actual soldiers fighting in Fallujah, they actually said, "S--- yeah!" "Get some!" "Oo-rah!" All that kind of dialogue was actually coming out. You can go look it up on YouTube right now. The problem is when you put that in the game, people are like, "Really? Do people really say that?" So you have a perception issue there.

The campaign felt easier this time around. Is that on purpose?
RF: Casual and Normal have been made easier. We felt like Casual certainly wasn't casual enough. It didn't live up to its name in the past. It wasn't for a casual gamer; it was for a casual shooter gamer.

The ability to get revived in Hardcore has given Hardcore a perception of being easier. The actual gameplay itself is pretty much on par with where it was in the past, but it has a little more of a safety mechanism. Insane is still crazy.

CB: I'd rather from the get-go have the game be maybe a smidge easy. Then those who want the difficulty can find and apply the mutators on Insane mode

Have people been using the mutators much?
RF: One of the things that we're looking at is that some of the mutators are a little too challenging. I set the bar a little too high to get them, at least within the first few weeks. So one of the things we're looking at is how we can massage some of the numbers – the Comet mutator is an example. We're making the requirements easier so it's a little more broadly accessible.

Would you make another four-player co-op game again, knowing how much time and effort it costs?
RF: I would, it's the way that...

CB: Never! [laughs]

My main thing moving forward, for any hypothetical future products that have not been announced, would be to make that accessibility easier in regards to getting together with four players.

I think it led to better combat bowls, honestly, when we were conscious of the fact that there could be four actual breathing people behind the controllers. We allowed for more elbow room, more flanking opportunities, which got us a little bit away from some of the corridorish-ness that some of the Gears 2 combat encounters had.

How do you answer people who say Gears 3 is more of the same?
CB: That's the shooter conundrum, right? You're either doing version whatever-point-five and they say it's a rehash, or you change a lot of stuff and they say you've ruined the franchise. That's the catch-22 of a shooter. But I think if you look at pound-for-pound the amount of features that are in this game...I'm just exceptionally proud of the product.

Your DLC plan is much more extensive for Gears 3. Is that the right decision so far?
RF: What people need to understand is that extra content is something that you have to plan.

CB: You don't just lift up the rock and say, "Oh, s---! There's new levels!"

RF: There are people who think that the first day of DLC development is the day after you launched. That's not the way it works. A lot of it is that you have to prepare and plan and manage your resources and your people and everything to allow for that. I think that as the industry has matured, we've gotten more into that. It's less about shipping what's left over. It's not about, "Oh, we had this map left over"... It's keeping the disc in the tray. In a used game culture that you have to actively fight against, I think DLC is one of the ways that you do that.

The freezing profile bug is nasty, and out of character for Epic. What happened there?
RF: It's a very small, small part of our audience because there are some very specific things that you have to do to make it happen. The nice thing is that we've already been looking into it, and we believe we have a fix that we'll be rolling out in the next update that will fix the issue for the people that have it.

CB: I think the biggest thing right now in a world where you're trying to get people's attention with everything is responsiveness. Making sure that our servers are up. If they go down for a couple hours, making sure we warn people. Let them know we are proactively tweaking the game on a regular basis; we massaged back the gib radius of the sawed-off shotgun very quickly after the game shipped. We're already swapping some weapons on different maps, to try new layouts to optimize the online experience. To let them know that we're here, and we're tweaking the dials, and we're continuing to improve the game. ◆


BJ Penn
Knockouts: 7 | Assassinations: 1,264



Batman: Arkham City

How do you follow up a game that was considered the greatest comic book game of all time by critics and fans alike? That was the challenge facing Rocksteady Studios and its game director, Sefton Hill. Recently we sat down with Hill to discuss Batman: Arkham City's inception, development hurdles, and amazing open-world gameplay

In Arkham Asylum, a secret wall revealed a hidden blueprint of Gotham City. This was obviously a hint to what was coming next. Did you know you were going to make Arkham City at this point, or was it just the idea of going to Gotham?
We had sort of a sketched-out story. It wasn't finalized, but we knew exactly where we wanted to go with it. So we thought it would be quite nice to hide a hint for players to find and guess where the story was going to go next. We wanted to take Batman into Gotham City, but at the same time make it an almost hellish version of Gotham City. We felt that a concentrated pool of villains in one location would provide a unique and interesting challenge for him. That was kind of the starting off point. We started working on the story from there. We also looked at where we wanted the story to go in terms of its structure. You know, where it ends and building out the arc from there.

The first game built off of DC Comics' comic book continuity to an extent. Do you still see this as an extension of that or is this a new Batman continuity?
I think it's a nice combination of the two. We see characters that appear in the Arkham-verse as someone that is 100 percent recognizable to the quintessential version of that character. They have all of the characteristics of that character, but then we kind of morph them into something that feels plausible yet fantastical. We don't need to be too fantasy, because everything starts to lose its consequence. We want it to feel real and gritty in a time and place where all of these fantastical characters could exist. We're always looking for that balance. Any character that we take into our world we work on: How would that character – with all of these characteristics that people know and love – exist in this universe with all of these other characters? How would he look? What would happen to him? What would he be doing there? But really the goal is always if you look at that character you would instantly recognize – the Penguin, for example. Even though he doesn't wear a monocle, he wears a broken bottom of a beer bottle. He still is very clearly the Penguin and you would know that as soon as you look at him.

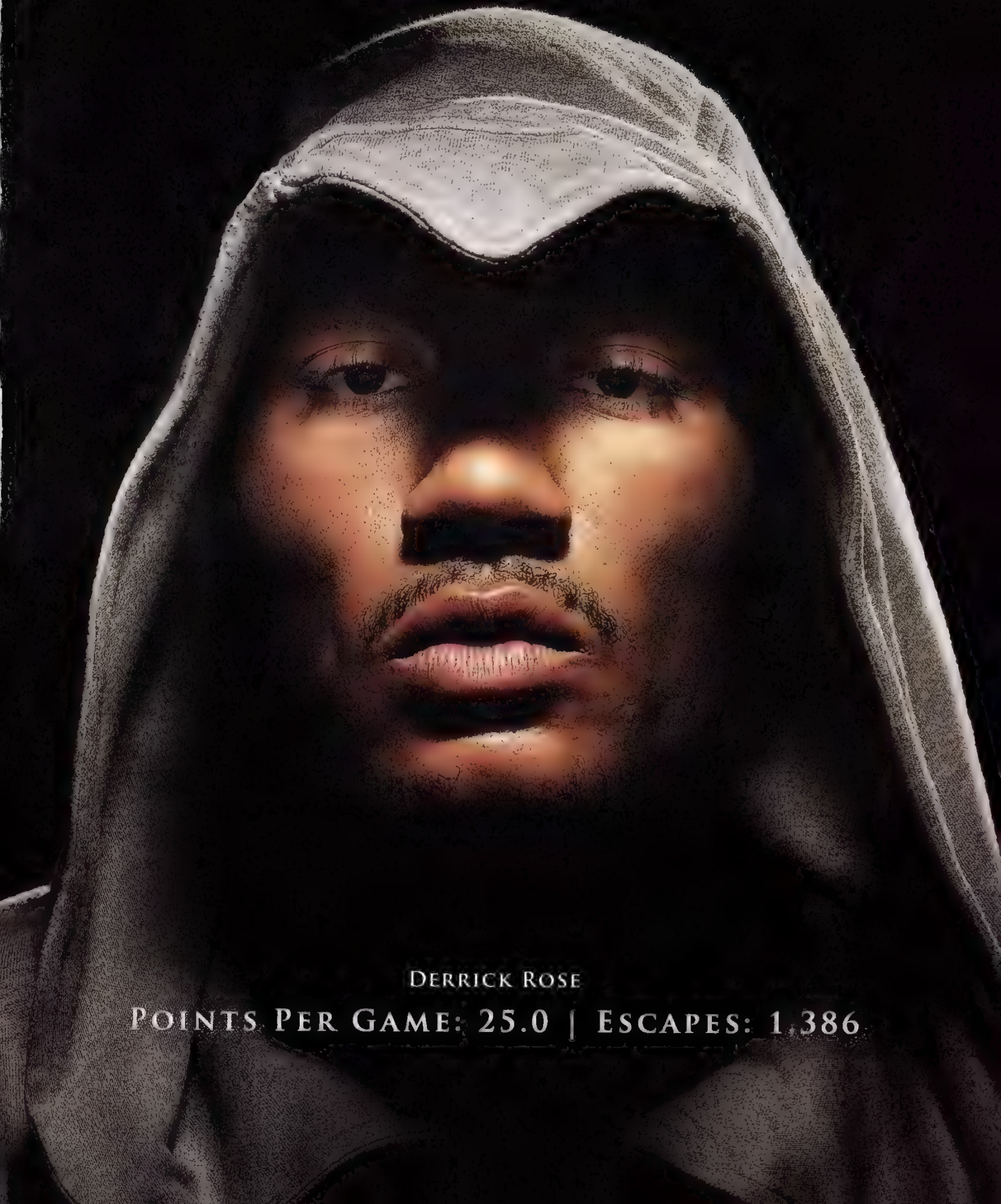
DC Comics just killed its long-running universe and replaced it with the New 52 – a new continuity with different origins and characters. Do you see this as a stumbling block moving forward or something you hope to embrace in future installments?
I think it's really exciting for DC and what they can do with the characters. As you work on continuity for a long time, that continuity becomes more and more complicated, so it's great to have those resets at certain times. To be honest, I don't think it affects us in any way because we have a great relationship with DC. I think the outcome is having those characters but within our Arkham-verse. We don't have to be consistent with other mediums, as long as we are true to the core characteristics and traits of these various characters. DC gives us a tremendous amount of freedom and I'm very thankful for their support and confidence in what we do

The game is littered with characters that you haven't revealed. Many are hidden and may not even be seen by players if they don't take the time to explore. Did you ever think about adding them to the critical path?
Honestly, we started off the other way. We had them more hidden originally. We didn't have them shown in any way, and it really didn't work as well because we wanted this to be a world that you explored and found all of these secrets. There was definitely a temptation and there were discussions to hide this great content. For me, that was always the point of it. You should feel that you are exploring. You should feel that you are revealing these different areas of Gotham. If your experience is different than someone else's, that's cool. If you put the hours in you are going to complete all of the side missions and main story. Fundamentally, we're always just trying to make the game that we want to play, and that would be the Batman game I want to play. I wouldn't want it all on the main path, and I would want to be surprised if I go off that main path. I might run into Bane or meet all of these different characters. I want to be surprised when I do that. I want the game to feel like anything is possible wherever I go. It was really important to me that they weren't on the main path and that the stories off the main path were really worthwhile, because a lot of side missions that are just "go here and collect 20 things" almost feel like a chore. We didn't want that. We wanted the side missions to, in many ways, not even feel like side missions and feel more like a part of the overall Batman experience. We wanted them to have the same production values of the main story that just happen to be a little vignette of the story. In many ways, if you just stick to the main story, you're only seeing half of the game.

Catwoman's missions give a different feel, yet use the same controls as Batman. Was the intent always to build around Batman, or did you have other ideas for her functionality?
It was always our intention to keep it the same. We knew that she would have this guest-starring role and as you played as her in five to ten percent of the game, we didn't want to throw a new control scheme at you. It would be confusing and it wouldn't be fun. We wanted it to be something where you switch to Catwoman and could immediately play, yet it still feels different. We spent a lot of time on getting that balance right. Her moves are different, yet you can immediately pick up how to use them. It went through quite a few iterations, but that was always our goal.

Will the controls be similar for the forthcoming Nightwing DLC?
We built their moves around the core moves you know for strike, evade, counter, grapple, but at the same time, he has his own gadgets and strengths and weaknesses. It works really well for Nightwing, and Robin as well. He's not quite as fast as Catwoman and not nearly as strong as Batman, but his gadgets really turned out well and allow him to take on fighters and armed thugs in different ways than Batman.

Did you hide a clue in this one like you did in Arkham Asylum? Will gamers be able to find a secret that points at what comes next?
We're still looking at options. [laughs] I will say that there are lots of secrets hidden in this game. A ton of stuff. [laughs].



Derrick Rose

Points Per Game: 25.0 | Escapes: 1,386

Two Very Different Visions of a Post-Apocalyptic World

I can't even remember how long ago it was that I first heard about **I Am Alive**. The Ubisoft project has existed in some form for years, but it's finally heading toward an actual release on downloadable platforms this winter. Originally, I Am Alive was planned as a retail release, but Ubisoft has dramatically shifted development, and now a small, independent-style team is crafting a new vision. "The original game was, among other issues, struggling to define its own identity because of the necessity of being a mass-market game and of compromising to appeal to everyone," explains creative director Stan Mettra. "Switching to digital format and turning to more innovation-savvy and risk-taking audiences allowed us to make the strong creative choices that the concept was begging for."

You play as a man struggling to survive after a series of cataclysms rock the world. A year after the horrific events, he's managed to get back to his hometown to track down his wife and daughter. Mettra likens the gameplay to third-person survival-horror games like Resident Evil or Silent Hill, but with an added dose of exploration and climbing. There's also a significant component of interaction with NPCs in the game world, an



I Am Alive
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

experience that will hopefully be surprising. "In our context, society has fully collapsed, shortage is everywhere and mistrust prevails. We wanted to make sure the player is uncertain of the other guy's reaction," Mettra says. "NPCs might talk to you, threaten you, bully you, or ask for help." Combat is tactical and deadly, and you'll need to use bluffs, threats, and surprise assaults to win the day; running around shooting won't get you very far. "If used smartly, a single bullet might save your life when facing a group of thugs surrounding you," Mettra explains. The game is headed towards an M rating, reflecting the harsh situations on display in this post-disaster world. Law has broken down, and the strong prey on the weak, and the developer isn't shying away from the implications.

I'm curious about I Am Alive. After its long period in development stasis, it'd be easy to dismiss the game out of hand, but I'm impressed by the new direction, from the grainy, film-style art direction to the tense, survival-focused gameplay. By mixing the traversal of collapsing buildings with the dread of navigating the devastated society, I think Ubisoft could have a compelling hook. I've yet to get my hands on the game to see if the action holds up to scrutiny, but there are certainly some cool ideas at play here.

I'm equally fascinated by a new project called **Krater**, the latest from Swedish developer Fatshark. The independent team is hard at work on this dream project that it has kicked around for nearly a decade. The action/RPG is set in a distant future after a devastating war shatters the planet. Huge craters dot the surface, and survivors have flocked to the area around one such crater in Sweden, thus the Swedish spelling of the game title. The massive crater sits over many levels of a buried military complex, which is the reason it was bombed in the first place. You control a team of scavengers who descend into the crater in search of equipment and riches.

Gameplay is loosely modeled after classics like Diablo, with a strong focus on loot gathering and monster slaying. However, unlike the traditional model, you control a team of three characters. Each character has two unique skills, so your hotbar will always include six abilities. You'll trade this team of three characters out on a regular basis. In fact, new characters are like loot; each potential party member has a familiar color value attached to them. Purple epic party members are rare and hard to find, just like the corresponding equipment. Class roles fall under traditional parameters, including tanks, damage dealers, healers, and crowd control specialists, but you'll have to make your team work with only three of the roles represented.

Descending into the caves surrounding the massive blast site, the game world defies expectations with lush, colorful visuals at odds with the harsh combat. Adventures are designed to be full of consequences, like characters developing untreatable injuries and facing permanant death if you don't carefully steward their health. Fatshark is also implementing co-op, ensuring players can travel with friends to plumb the depths of the mysterious world.

From a development perspective, the most interesting thing about Krater is the team's approach to release. Though a final version of Krater is many months away, Fatshark plans to release a "playable vision" early in 2012. Aping the successful formula popularized by Minecraft, the developer wants to let the player community guide the direction of development. After an early, low-cost playable version becomes available, the team plans to listen to feedback and alter the game accordingly. Krater is being built right now for PC and Mac, but plans include an eventual shift to platforms like XBLA and PSN once more elements have been finalized. Is this a vision for how independent development will work in the coming years? It's certainly one possibility.

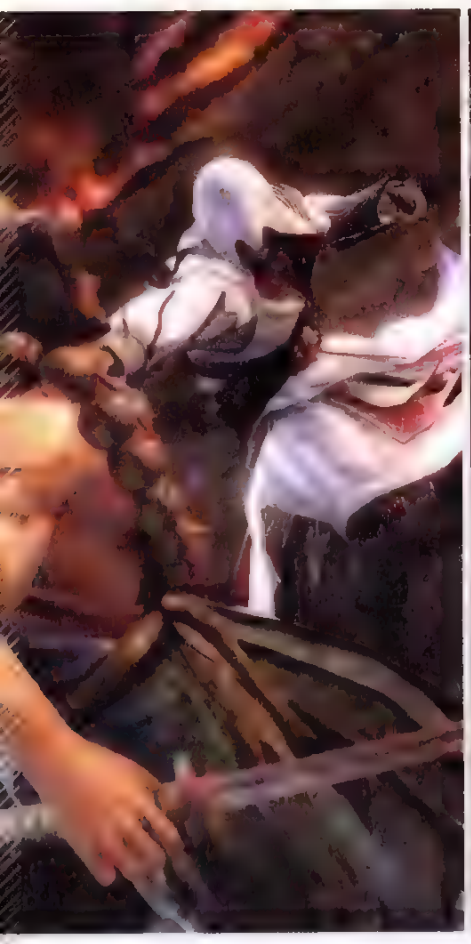
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Krater
PC, Mac



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Ubisoft lends their **top assassin** to Soulcalibur V

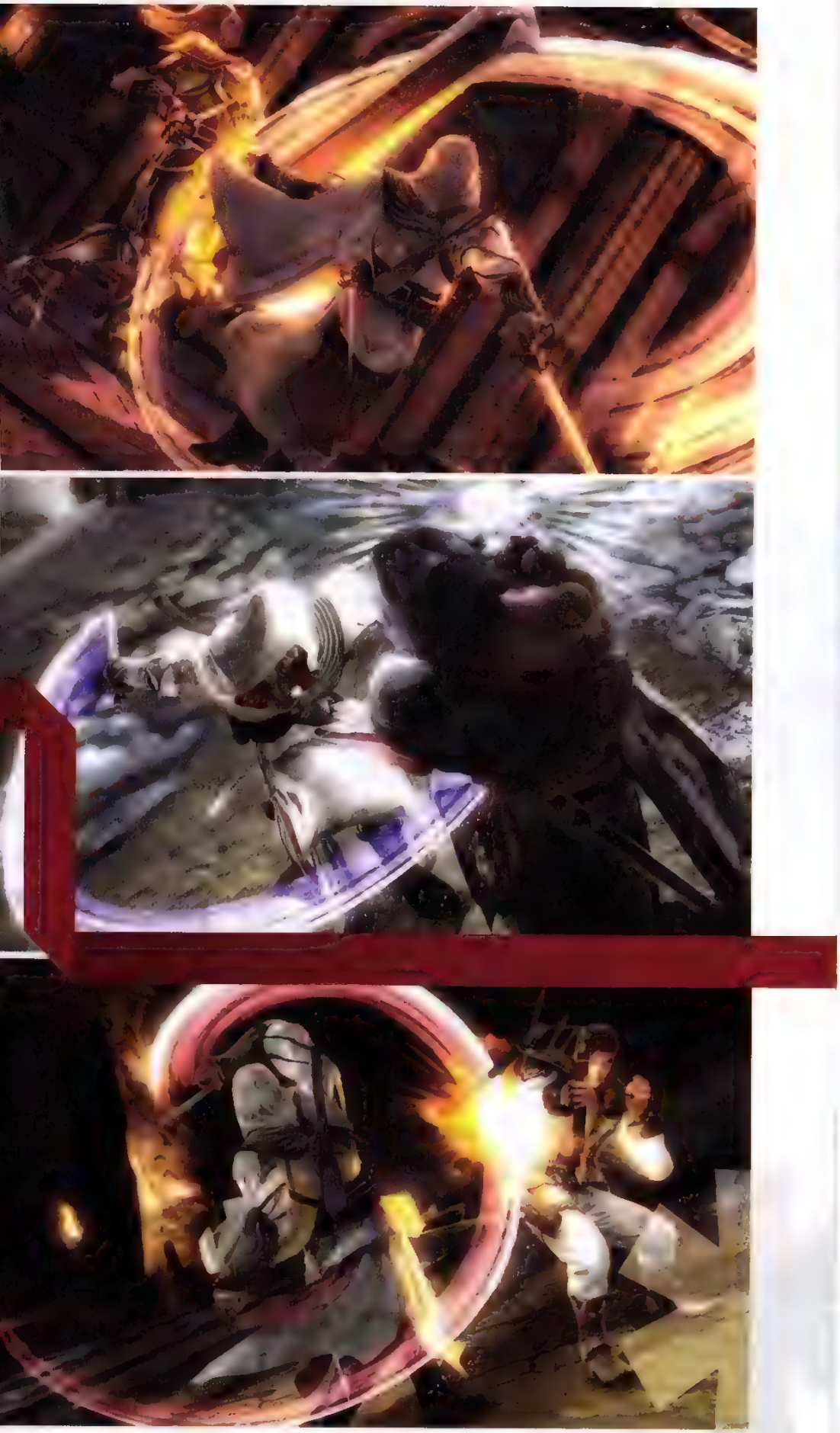


by Dan Ryckert

Longtime fans of the Soulcalibur series know that each installment brings the possibility of a surprise guest character. The first entry in the franchise only featured Namco originals, although Yoshimitsu was borrowed from the Tekken series. When Soul Calibur II released in 2003, it featured console-specific guests including Spawn, Heihachi, and even Link. After a break from guest characters in SC III, Project Soul came back with a bang by including Darth Vader and Yoda in Soulcalibur IV. Considering they've kept up an "every other game" streak regarding guest characters, it seemed possible that V would focus on new original characters rather than cameos from other series. It turns out this isn't the case, as Ubisoft has lent one of their top stars to the long-running fighting franchise. Ezio Auditore da Firenze's story may be completed in Assassin's Creed: Revelations, but he'll still make an appearance in 2012 thanks to his inclusion in both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions of Soulcalibur V.

As you can see in the screenshots, Ezio's character model appears faithful to his look in the series that made him famous. We had a chance to play as Ezio a bit in an early preview build, and he seems to be a formidable addition to the roster. He primarily attacks with short swords, but you'll catch the occasional dagger swipe if you're paying close attention. His hidden pistol makes him even more of a threat, which should give him an advantage in a series that doesn't feature many projectile attacks. Don't expect every move to be faithful to his actual abilities, as you'll see plenty of his attacks enhanced by lightning or other particle effects familiar to fans of the franchise.

From what we've seen so far, Ezio's look and weaponry make him the most natural fit of any of the guest characters in the series' past. Cameos from Spawn and Star Wars were fun to see, but they didn't really jibe with the setting or visual style of Soulcalibur. In terms of both aesthetics and mechanics, the master assassin will feel right at home when Namco's fighter releases early next year.



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Big Reveals Coming to Spike TV's VGAs



On December 10, the video game industry will descend upon Sony Picture Studios in Los Angeles to see which games will be honored at Spike TV's annual Video Game Awards show. Last year, Rockstar Games' Red Dead Redemption walked away with Game of the Year honors, and Batman: Arkham City appears to be this year's early favorite.

Seeing which games win awards is only part of this show's allure. Over the last few years, gamers have been tuning in to see which new games are announced through world premiere trailers and gameplay clips. Geoff Keighley, publisher relations for Spike, says that this year's show will have more than 10 world premieres. Many of these reveals will be kept secret until the moment they air, but almost every game that graces the screen will release in 2012 or beyond. "It's a great time for the industry to reset at the end of the year," says Keighley. "All the big games are out, and now it's time to look ahead. The VGAs are in the perfect spot to recognize the best games of the year and preview where things are going next."

by Andrew Reiner

Keighley were gracious enough to tease three of the games with Game Informer. As you can see, Hideo Kojima will be taking the stage to reveal new details about the long-coming Metal Gear Solid: Rising. Alan Wake's oft-rumored sequel will make an appearance, hopefully putting to rest speculation as to whether it is a current-gen or next-gen game. BioWare will also be a part of the show, teasing what we can only imagine is a new franchise. This game will be developed by a new BioWare studio.

The show will once again make use of augmented reality, displaying 3D graphics in real time over the stage. This allows the stage to take on an appearance appropriate for the game being announced or awarded. "We love the idea of bringing the games to life," says Keighley. "One thing you'll see this year is that we are looking back more at the industry historically. We look at the present with nominees and winners. We look to the future with world premieres. And we want to look back to see what has made gaming great. Watching the Oscars, I always love when you see these old films and amazing careers that people have had. We want to do a little bit of that this year. For instance, we'll be giving Blizzard a special award called Gamer God, which looks back at their amazing career. We can remember all of those great games we've played over the years, but also explain to a wider audience just how far gaming has come."

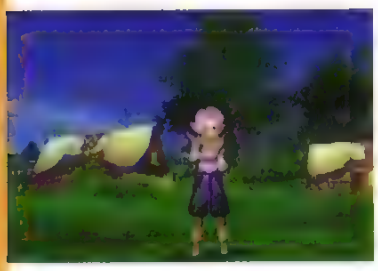
This year's show will be produced by Hollywood legend Mark Burnett, who produced the 63rd Prime Time Emmy Awards, and still produces MTV's Music Awards and People's Choice Awards. Burnett says that he's excited about the opportunity to produce this show after working on non-video game events. "My kids usually beat me up in games," he said with a laugh. "I want this show to be the best VGAs yet." To do this, he wants to address the criticisms that previous years' shows have had, and doesn't want people to tune in just for the game reveals. "I want the entire two-hour show to be entertaining."

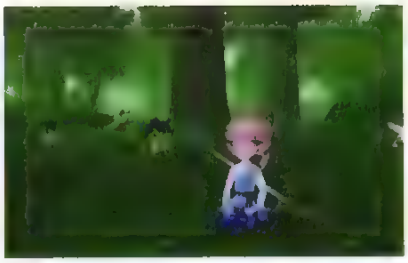


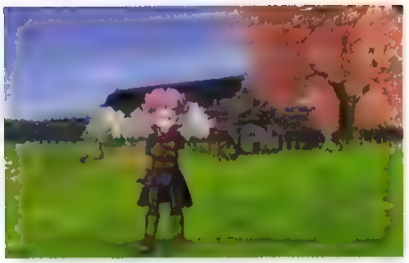
Spike hasn't revealed who this year's host will be, but according to Casey Patterson, executive producer and executive vice president of Spike, "this year's host will be a combination of a celebrity and gamer." Jack Black? Zachary Levi? We'll have to wait to see who takes the stage. "We know world premieres and game reveals are a big part of why gamers tune into the show," says Patterson. "This year our vision for the show is simple: To recognize the best games of the year and show viewers amazing world premieres of big games coming in 2012 and beyond."

Make sure you tune in or set your DVRs to record the show at 8 p.m. ET on Spike TV, MTV2, and will be streamed online.









Dragon Quest X: Set up to fail?

As far as major Japanese RPG franchises go, Final Fantasy has always held the crown in North America, but Dragon Quest holds a special spot in my heart. In 25 years of existence, the main DQ games have tended toward slow growth at best, sticking to grind-heavy gameplay conventions and simplistic stories that some gamers got bored of but many, like myself, find continuously charming.

Dragon Quest X marks one of the biggest shifts the series has ever experienced. It's exciting, scary, and quite possibly a huge mistake.

Way back in 2008, well before Dragon Quest IX hit shelves, Square Enix announced that Dragon Quest X would be heading to the Wii. Last month at Tokyo Game Show, the publisher finally released details for this much-anticipated title and revealed that it will also be coming to the Wii U in a slightly upgraded form. Many early details are in line with my (and many other fans') expectations for a Dragon Quest game, but I found others a bit shocking.

Dragon Quest X will continue building on the multiplayer functionality that was a popular addition to DQ IX, but the latest entry embraces this element more completely. The game is officially titled Dragon Quest X Online, and it will feature a full-on MMO structure and monthly fee. Some of the massively multiplayer touches include customizable player housing, an auction house, a crafting system, and five different playable races.

Fans of traditional Dragon Quest expenences need not give up hope. DQ X will also feature a lengthy story with a clear ending point, along with the giant continents and goofy monsters the series is known for. Despite those concessions, I can't help but feel that Square is taking this franchise – one that is still thriving in Japan – in a highly questionable direction.

Unlike previous titles in this long-running series, Square Enix will be developing Dragon Quest X internally. Square has plenty of internal teams with heavy RPG experience, so it might seem like a logical choice…but Square Enix's MMO history is much shadier.



Square first attempted to take one of its biggest franchises into the MMO territory with Final Fantasy XI way back in 2002. It was clunky and not particularly polished, but in the days before World of Warcraft, many hardcore fans saw past the flaws and stuck with it, creating a loyal group of players on three platforms – PC, PlayStation 2, and Xbox 360 – that keep the game running today.

The publisher's most recent MMO, Final Fantasy XIV, paints a less hopeful picture. Originally planned for release on both PC and PlayStation 3, FF XIV launched on the former last year to wildly negative criticism – including my own. Not only was the game simply unfinished, it showcased some core misunderstandings of what players expect from a modern MMO. The outrage over the game was so widespread that Square Enix completely rearranged the development staff, postponed the PS3 version indefinitely, and is just now finally implementing a subscription fee as it attempts to salvage the product a year later.

So in the MMO realm, Square Enix has one middling success and one painful failure, both masquerading as core entries in the Final Fantasy series. Even Square Enix CEO Yoichi Wada concedes that Final Fantasy XIV "greatly damaged" the once-pristine Final Fantasy name. Square Enix clearly sees the opportunity in the MMO space, but hasn't demonstrated much aptitude in providing players what they want in that arena. Does it really make sense for them to risk another major franchise on this style of gameplay?

Even if you're willing to give Square Enix the benefit of the doubt, the company has not exactly inspired confidence by choosing Nintendo's consoles as the only platforms for this MMO. There are a lot of reasons that I love Nintendo, but its commitment to providing quality online experiences is not one of them. The Wii U could have a much more solid multiplayer infrastructure than previous systems, but at this point we just don't know. With a potentially small install base on the Wii U and a Wii audience that's not used to getting charged a subscription fee for games, what are the possibilities of an MMO succeeding on these platforms?

I've been a fan of the Dragon Quest series for as long as I can remember, but that doesn't mean I'm against Square Enix taking risks or trying new things. Pushing the franchise into multiplayer with DQ IX seemed like an insane move when it was first announced, but it paid off with one of the most popular entries yet. Dragon Quest X might still surprise me and do the same. When it's time, I will step back from all these concerns and give it the chance it deserves…but for now, I have my doubts.

by Philip Kollar


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LIMITED EDITION
CALL OF DUTY MW3
EAR FORCE DELTA
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Man Up with Christopher Moynihan



From left to right: Mather Zickel, Dan Fogler, Henry Simmons, and Christopher Moynihan

More and more Hollywood projects try to slide video games into movies and TV. [illegible] *Wind* and *For Your Consideration*, and his love of video games.

How did you first come up with the concept for *Man Up!*?
My brothers, friends, and I all play. Every night I'd get a text saying, "Hey, I'm going into Red Dead Redemption," or Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty. Eventually, it became the place where you download your day. I kind of had this idea to do a show about the modern man that differs from our fathers and grandfathers before that. Our grandfathers went to a local VFW hall and our fathers went to the local pub. For us, we go into this online multiplayer world where we just catch up and shoot the s---. I wanted to use this as book-ends for a series. So we start every episode in this multiplayer world with our headsets on and download whatever the episode's about.

In the pilot, Will and Kenny want to reclaim this lost manhood whereas your character, Craig, is content with his emotional side.
Yeah, he's not chasing manhood. If anything, he's chasing womanhood all the time. He's the one of the three that's most comfortable with the fact that he's different from the generations prior. He really has nothing to prove. It's mostly Will. Will is a man caught between generations. He truly is a man. Kenny's too much of a child to be a man and Craig's too much of a woman to be a man. Will's the only one with a crisis on his hands. Grant (Henry Simmons), who is our fourth guy, is the full-blown, civilized modern man who's willing to jump into the fray and fight when he has to fight. But he's also super sensitive and into Pilates and into health. He is kind of like the Superman that all of us would hope to be.

He's the alpha male foil who's dating Kenny's ex?
We try to get Kenny and Grant to become friends because Will and Craig have a secret bromance behind Kenny's back. We have to figure out a way to get these two guys to be friends so we hold a screening of Star Wars Episode IV because Grant has never seen it – taking his Darth-ginity as Kenny calls it.

Will the show tie in to real games from time to time?
I wanted to do Call of Duty. I wanted to show capture the flag. But you get into a legal problem with, "Sony owns this, and Disney [the parent company of ABC] owns whatever." We can't ever really tie in a game unless it's directly related to Disney or they're willing to make a licensing deal. If it were up to me, I would love to do game launches. We have an episode where we're camping out for a release of a new game. We were hoping to tie it to the release of [Batman] Arkham City, but it can't clear legally so we had to make up some bulls--- game called Badass 2. We would love to tie in real titles; it just becomes a legal nightmare when you're working with studios and networks.

What was it like working with Christopher Guest?
It's the personal highlight of my career because I was such a huge Chris Guest fan prior. In 1988, I shot a commercial with him – he would shoot commercials between movies – and then he would just keep using me. He came up to me when we were shooting a Levis Dockers ad and said, "I'm doing a movie in October. I'd love for you to do it." It was great. I went and did *A Mighty Wind*. We did all live music, four nights at the Orpheum Theater shooting that final concert, and then we did a tour with the entire cast.

Then a few years later he asked me to do *For Your Consideration*. The entire experience is fantastic in that Chris sits down with each of us and says, "This is who I want you to be." Then they give us an outline of the movie, which essentially says "This character and this character talk about X." That's all it is. Then you basically bring your point of view to it and he just rolls. I believe he shot up to 100 hours of footage on each of those movies that gets whittled down to 90 minutes.

Any teases for future episodes?
Billy Dee Williams will be in the show playing himself as Kenny's idol. Kenny winds up sharing a hospital room with him and they start running lines from *Empire Strikes Back*. Unless it's going to cost an arm and a leg to get that dialogue, that's a big sneak peek that's coming up. That and we have a lot of cool guest spots. John Michael Higgins from the Chnstopher Guest crew and Don Lake, all these guys have been really nice to come do guest spots for us. It's really exciting.

Check your local listings for broadcasts of Man Up! *or watch full episodes at abc.com*



Blizzard prepares for war at Blizzcon 2011

World of Warcraft prepares for the onslaught of new competition

By Phil Kollar

In its seven years on the market, World of Warcraft has yet to face any major competition in the MMORPG space. Plenty of solid MMO contenders have appeared, but even successful titles like Lord of the Rings Online and Rift haven't seriously drained WoW's seemingly endless user-base. With major new MMOs such as Star Wars: The Old Republic and Guild Wars 2 on the horizon, 2012 has the potential to be the first year that makes Blizzard sweat since WoW's launch. The giant developer used its annual Blizzcon celebration to unveil some of the products and features that will help defend against this latest push to unseat the MMO king.

Chief among the announcements was a new expansion for World of Warcraft – the fourth since its launch – titled Mists of Pandaria. This expansion is planned for release next year and raises the level cap by five to level 90. It also adds a new continent to the world of Azeroth with five large zones, a new melee-focused monk class, and a new playable race of cuddly bear creatures called the Pandaren.

Though heavily criticized by some fans, the Pandaren race has existed in the Warcraft universe since Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne. They are the first neutral race in the game. Once Pandaren players make it to at least level 10 and leave the Pandaren starting zone, they will be forced to choose between the Alliance and the Horde.

Other additions to Mists of Pandaria include nine new dungeons, three new raids, PvE scenarios that provide instanced challenges outside of dungeons, and a huge talent point system revamp.

Perhaps the most insidiously brilliant change coming to Mists of Pandaria is the new pet battling system. With game design that sounds virtually identical to Nintendo's popular Pokémon series, players can level the non-combat pets that Blizzard has populated the game with for years now. All except the rarest pets work with this system, and Blizzard plans to introduce a flood of new pets you can fight and capture in the wild. You can also visit master pet fighter NPCs in various cities and challenge them to become the very best.

Seemingly acknowledging that Diablo III's addictive, loot-collecting gameplay could steal some steam from World of Warcraft, Blizzard unveiled the WoW Annual Pass plan. Players who commit to a year-long WoW subscription (which can still be paid out monthly) will receive a free digital copy of Diablo III when it releases next year.

The Annual Pass may help keep some players from quitting to focus on Diablo (or one of the new non-Blizzard MMOs coming out next year), and it also ensures that these same players will keep their accounts active until the new expansion hits. Blizzard has said previously that it wants to increase the speed with which it releases expansions, but if Mists of Pandaria isn't coming for a year or longer, the developer will need something like this to keep players from losing interest.

Outside of World of Warcraft, Blizzard had some minor news for its other major franchises. It revealed the Diablo III limited edition, which includes an art book, a behind-the-scenes DVD, a USB drive packed with Diablo II, and an in-game mount for World of Warcraft. Sadly, Blizzard still did not announce a release date for the long-anticipated game, though it did show another beautiful cinematic.

New units from upcoming StarCraft II expansion Heart of the Swarm debuted, as did Blizzard DOTA, a new version of the popular PC genre that started as a Warcraft III mod. Blizzard DOTA uses the StarCraft II engine and will be released for free. It features heroes from across Blizzard's various franchises teaming up to fight each other and legions of computer-controlled monsters along the way.

Along with Blizzard DOTA and Heart of the Swarm, StarCraft II players can look forward to the release of Blizzard Arcade, a new centralized hub for downloading user-made StarCraft II mods and scenarios. Blizzard still plans to allow players to charge for these mods eventually, though that functionality will not be available when it launches.

Blizzard certainly faces hefty challenges, but Blizzcon served as a reminder that 2012 could also be one of the developer's biggest years yet. With Diablo III, a StarCraft II expansion, and a World of Warcraft expansion all poised to be released next year, we'll have more Blizzard content at our fingertips than ever very soon.

To hear us discuss Mists of Pandaria on our MMO podcast, Respec Radio, head to gameinformer.com/mag









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The Essential Assassin's Creed

A Guide To The Basics

by Matt Miller

With the fourth major console installment upon us, and a host of portable games, comics, and novels to sift through, the Assassin's Creed universe has rapidly exploded into a substantive fiction. For all its richness, it also has the potential to be incredibly confusing. Here's what you need to know to jump in with both feet. Needless to say, if you haven't played up through last year's Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, some spoilers lie ahead. No spoilers for Revelations are included.



ASSASSINS

An ancient and secretive order devoted to the concept of free will for humanity. Paradoxically, while devoted to peace, the Assassin order uses murder to ensure its ideology. Throughout history, the Assassin order has attempted to subvert the Templars in their drive to dominate humanity under a single authority. After fighting the good fight for centuries, most of the Assassin order was wiped out in the early 21st century after a Templar sleeper agent infiltrated the ranks. The few remaining Assassins now wage a desperate fight against both the Templar threat and a larger danger looming over the entire planet.



FIRST CIVILIZATION

Humanity was not the first sentient race to exist on Earth. A powerful species sometimes referred to as Those Who Came Before had a vast and technologically sophisticated society that spread across the globe. Before dying off, the people of the First Civilization created humanity as a slave race. Humanity rebelled and began its own society. Most of the First Civilization was wiped out in a terrible catastrophe millennia ago. Many of humanity's early myths and religious concepts arise from this nearly forgotten progenitor race.



PIECE OF EDEN

Artifacts left behind by the First Civilization are so technologically advanced as to appear magical, even to modern humans. Dubbed Pieces of Eden, these ancient relics bestow remarkable powers on their wielders. Many pieces of Eden have been utilized to alter the course of human events. King Arthur wielded a Sword of Eden, remembered in legend as Excalibur. Alexander the Great used a Staff of Eden to help conquer much of the known world. An object called the Apple of Eden has been sought by both Templars and Assassins for centuries for its ability to control the minds of men and women.



TEMPLARS

Fundamentally opposed to the Assassin order, the Templars believe they must usher humanity to greatness and peace through carefully calculated manipulation, and that a firm and authoritative hand is the only path away from ignorance. Like the Assassins, the Templar order has existed in some form for millennia, but in recent decades the public face of the Templar order is a company called Abstergo Industries. Abstergo has a hand in everything from pharmaceuticals to technology, but its most notable advancements in recent years revolve around the study of genetic memory and the collection of powerful artifacts left behind by the First Civilization.



The Encyclopedia

Want to get the full story of the Assassin's Creed universe? A 250-page encyclopedia from Ubisoft tracks the full scope of the vast fictional universe. The book is filled with art and extra details about characters, places, and artifacts central to the story. Its contents were invaluable in editing our article, and it makes for a fun read for any devoted fan. The Encyclopedia releases on November 8th for $39.95.

DESMOND MILES

Raised in an isolated commune, Desmond was born into the legacy of the Assassins. Off the grid to hide from Abstergo, he was educated in the ways of the Brotherhood, though Desmond had no interest in learning. He fled his home and began a new life as a bartender. Some time later, Abstergo found and abducted him for their continued research into genetic memory; Desmond's unique ancestry, combined with the use of a device called the Animus, gave him access to important information about the powerful artifacts sought by the Templars. With the help of a woman named Lucy Stillman, Desmond escaped from Abstergo to meet up with an isolated cell of Assassins. He continued his investigations into his ancestors' memories, uncovering the forgotten secrets of the First Civilization, as well as hints of a catastrophe about to sweep the planet. When last we saw Desmond, he had uncovered an Apple of Eden hidden beneath the Coliseum in Rome. With the Apple in hand, an unseen force seemed to take him over, and he stabbed Lucy Stillman. The shock of the event sent Desmond into a coma, and the remaining Assassins placed him back in the Animus to keep him alive.



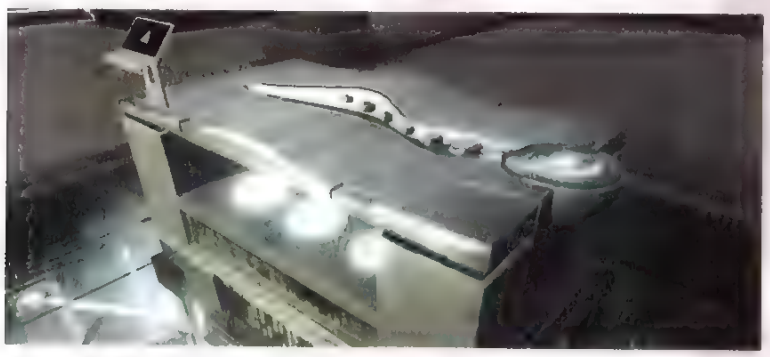
ALTAÏR IBN-LA'AHAD

An early ancestor of Desmond Miles, Altaïr was a 12th century Assassin who oversaw a fundamental restructuring of the order over the course of his lifetime. Mentored by the Assassin leader Al Mualim, Altaïr unraveled the plot of the Templars to use an ancient artifact called the Apple of Eden to control humanity. After defeating the Templars, Altaïr was devastated to learn that his mentor had betrayed the order and attempted to use it for a similar purpose. Altaïr killed his master and took possession of the powerful object. After assuming leadership of the Assassins, Altaïr married a former Templar named Maria Thorpe. With his Apple of Eden in hand, he set out to learn its secrets and simultaneously spread the Assassins' message across the world.



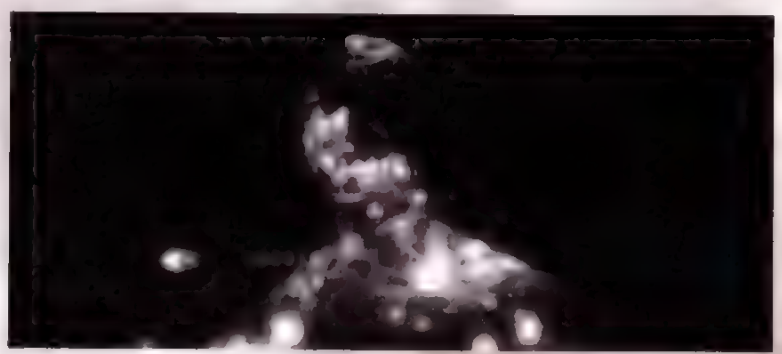
EZIO AUDITORE DA FIRENZE

Ezio was a young and brash 16th century Florentine when his father and brothers were brutally executed before his eyes. In a quest for vengeance, Ezio joined the Assassin Brotherhood and sought out those responsible: members of the Templar order. In a quest that spanned much of Italy, Ezio shattered the Templar power structure and even brought down their leader, Pope Alexander VI. Over the course of his journey, he acquired and later relinquished a relic called the Apple of Eden, leaving it behind in a temple that would not be uncovered until Desmond found it 500 years later. Over the years, Ezio rose in power and influence within the Assassins, and eventually became Mentor over the entire order.



ANIMUS

Created by Abstergo Industries, the modern-day front of the Templars, the Animus can unlock and interpret the genetic memory of a subject, and then project those memories as virtual experiences. In effect, a subject in the Animus can live out sequences of their ancestor's lives. In the early 21st century, Abstergo utilized the Animus chiefly in an effort to uncover the locations of various Pieces of Eden. Unbeknownst to its creators, the Assassin order stole blueprints of the Animus and improved upon it to create the Animus 2.0. Recently, Abstergo has begun mass-producing Animi to train its most valued agents by utilizing their own genetic memories. Extensive use of the Animus is highly dangerous; a side effect causes ancestral memories to bleed over into the subject's real life, causing hallucination or death.



SUBJECT 16

A mysterious man known only as Subject 16 preceded Desmond's time within the Animus. Dead after overexposure to the Animus, a fragment of Subject 16's consciousness somehow remains trapped within the machine. Understanding more about the Animus, the Assassin/Templar conflict, and the First Civilization than Desmond, Subject 16 has left a mystifying trail of clues behind meant only for someone else who followed him into the Animus. His motives remain unclear.

top ten

PUZZLES

by Kyle Hilliard



The Lost Woods (The Legend of Zelda)

The original Zelda was the first to feature the Lost Woods, and it's one of the most memorable elements of the game. Without the proper directions, The Lost Woods quickly become a frustrating maze where everything looks the same, and progress toward the exit seems impossible. To finally find the appropriate directions (north, west, south, west) meant entry to the graveyard, and escape from the seemingly endless loop.



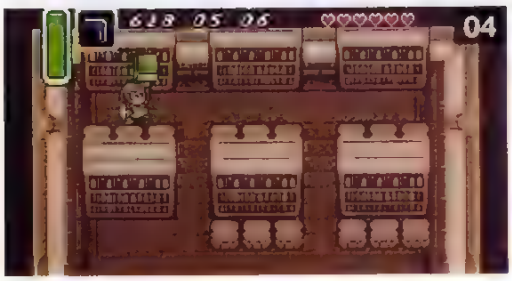
The Truth (Assassin's Creed II)

The Truth is a puzzle that permeates the entire AC II experience. Throughout the game you uncover short puzzles that take place outside of the game, and each one unlocks a few additional seconds of a strange video featuring Adam and Eve. It's bizarre, mysterious, and worth the exploration and puzzle solving needed to uncover the full clip.



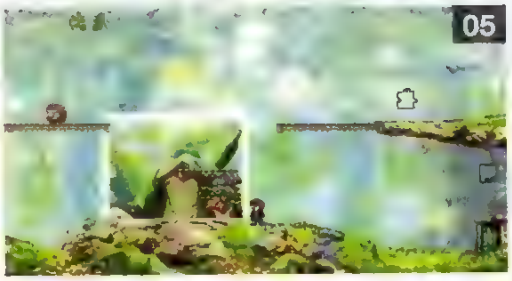
Test Chamber 15 (Portal)

By the time you get this far in GLaDOS' gauntlet, you are familiar with the idea of translating your downward falling momentum into horizontal flying momentum. Test chamber 15, however, is the first to show you that you can expand your momentum a great deal by falling through the portals multiple times. When you finally figure out the process and send Chell flying way across the level, you feel like you have wings.



Bookshelf Bash (A Link to the Past)

A book rests out of your reach on top of a bookshelf, and you need it. It's a typical Zelda scenario (you can see something you want, but you can't have it), but there is something about the simplistic solution that makes this puzzle stand out. Running into the bookshelf with the Pegasus Boots is a test of pure logic that makes sense even outside of the confines of Hyrule.



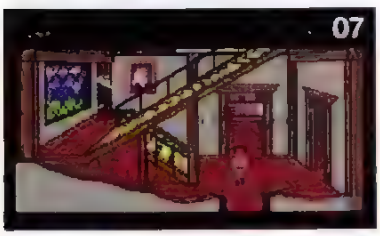
The Painting (Braid)

Did you think those paintings were just for decoration? Manipulating puzzle pieces to turn what appears to be background art into a platform is just one example of how Braid forces players to search for unconventional solutions. Many of the time-bending puzzles in this game are memorable, but the way this one broke the rules makes it stand apart.



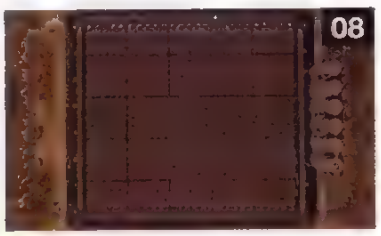
Colossus 13 (Shadow of the Colossus)

The winged sand worm slowly flies through the air, and all you and your horse can do is watch it as it mocks you for playing by gravity's rules. Bringing the colossus down to your level and jumping from a galloping Agro onto the soaring beast ranks as one of the most rewarding moments of the entire game.



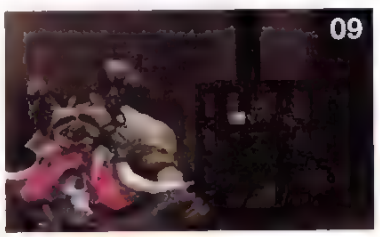
Cat Cookie (King's Quest III)

In King's Quest III, you begin the game as a servant to the evil wizard Manannan, who kidnaps young children, trains them to become servants, and kills them when they turn 18. Through a bit of covert thievery, questionable baking, and some amateur sorcery, you turn your captor into a cat by tricking him into eating a tainted cookie. It's a complicated process, but the rewards are worth it.



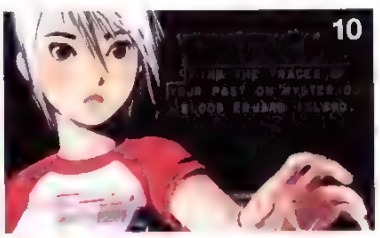
The Marbles (Riven)

The Myst series delivers the kinds of puzzles that force you to break out paper and take notes, but the marble puzzle in Riven is surely the most involved. It requires a detailed knowledge of the geography of the assorted Riven islands, as well as some mysterious symbol translation. It's impossible to accidentally guess the right answer, and the game offers no help or hints whatsoever.



Poseidon's Challenge (God of War)

Kratos is no stranger to pushing boxes onto switches, but in this scenario the switch activates flames that engulf the box, and the box contains a defenseless soldier. It perfectly encapsulates just how far Kratos will go to get what he wants. It's a simple puzzle, but it defines Kratos' personality in an important way.



Closing Time (Trace Memory)

To solve this puzzle, the player uses a stamp on the top screen of the DS to stamp an item on the bottom screen by simply closing the DS. Zelda later emulated this in Phantom Hourglass by having the player close the DS to copy a map from one screen to another, but Trace Memory did it first, so it deserves the nod.

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Diablo III's Dungeon Master

Jay Wilson is living his dream. As a gamer who claims to have once "worshipped" Diablo, he's now the game director for Diablo III, Blizzard's upcoming iteration of the legendary series. We recently spoke to Wilson about the future of Diablo and Blizzard's development philosophy.

interview by Adam Biessener

As the leader of Diablo III, you're more in the public eye. You're doing a lot of interviews and your comments are being dissected on a dozen Internet forums. How has that affected you as a designer?
It's made me a total basket case. [Laughs] No, not really. I had a microcosm of this experience when I worked on Dawn of War. Even though the Warhammer 40,000 community is arguably not as big as the Blizzard community, it's just as rabid. It's just as invested in what they love. The thing that I found with those communities is that they have a lot more trust in you if they feel like you're one of them. So, the thing I've always tried to do is make sure that I'm as honest as I can possibly be with anyone I communicate with. Talk to people about why you're making the decisions you're making. If you explain it to them and they don't agree, then make sure you listen to them. It doesn't mean that their viewpoint is right, but if you never give it the chance and hear it out, then you don't give yourself the chance to be wrong.

Did you ever seriously consider making a more radical departure from Diablo II?
No. I didn't. I had people who argued that I should, but I never felt that way. I was given carte blanche – I was never told, "Make Diablo III like Diablo II." I was brought in and told, "We want you to make another Diablo game." I probably could have convinced my team and we would have made something different. I just looked at it as a fan of Diablo; that's what I am. I hadn't gotten enough of the Diablo games and I wanted more. At the end of the day, that's the way Blizzard operates. At the core of what we do is: "Do we want to play that?"

The way that PC games are distributed and consumed has changed so much in the last five years. Does that change the way you approach post-release support and content for the game?
It might. It has not yet. We still tend to think of Diablo as a single-product game and that will mean it's most likely just focused on expansions. We could focus on DLC content if we wanted, but that just means it's going to delay a full-blown expansion. We could do content patches, but for our box games they tend to rarely add new content. We'd explore if it felt like the game needed it. But, again, that means that it's going to take us longer to do an expansion or we're going to steal value away from the expansion. That's something we don't want to do: charge money for something and have the player feel like they didn't get their money's worth.

Would the vision for what Battle.net is going to do for Diablo III and the investment that's going into it happen without a recurring revenue stream from the product?
It's pretty difficult to do any type of live service without a recurring revenue stream. By the way, I hate the term "recurring revenue stream" – please say that in the interview! [Laughs] Every time I have to speak in business-speak, it kills my soul. The thing is that everything costs money. One of the things that we try never to do is say, "How can we make money off this?" We say, "How can we provide a good service to our players?" We feel like good service justifies a cost.

That said, we've never been interested in turning Battle.net into some kind of subscription service. We're gamers too and we wouldn't want that. We don't want more services that we pay subscriptions for. That's why we explored the auction house idea and doing real money, because we saw that as a service. This is something players are already doing, and are going to do it anyway – except they are going to do it in such a way that's going to be a bad experience. Yes, it's a revenue stream for us, but we were more interested in offering a good service for players.

A perception among a certain segment online is that you get a memo from Activision Blizzard headquarters, signed by the majority stockholders that says, "You need to put a reccurring revenue stream in your game."
Absolutely not. That's never happened. I can't speak for Blizzard across the board, but that has never happened on Diablo III. No one has ever demanded anything. I was the one who proposed the real-money auction house and it was before the Activision/Blizzard merger. I don't believe we've changed how we've operated with the merger. We've had, I believe, seven different owners. The biggest difference between this one and the previous ones is that we actually have power in this relationship that we didn't have before because Activision and Blizzard are equal partners.

I'm legally obligated to ask you about Diablo III on consoles. Can you give us an update on where that is at?
We have a really great team. The lead designer Joshua Mosquiera was the lead designer of Company of Heroes and a former creative director at Ubisoft with a lot of console experience. We are starting to fill the team out with new hires and some core members of the Diablo III team. Because we are close to done with [the PC game], some groups finish before others, mostly the art group. We're able to ferry over some art talent to the console group. We are still in active exploring mode; we haven't officially announced a product. We say that because we like our product announcements to be a big deal. We haven't been as secretive about this one because our biggest barrier is actually getting a console team. People don't believe us when we say we're going to make a console game – flat out. I understand why they don't believe us, because we've tried this before. We've also never invested in it to the degree that we're doing now, and we've never had a product that we felt was appropriate for it.

So are you leaning more towards actually porting Diablo III to console?
We don't want to port it. We want to build it for console. There's a key difference. Certainly, a lot of things get brought over. But a port is trying to take a PC game and graft it onto a console. Our goal is to make a game that feels like it's natively made for a console. If we make it, we want it to feel like a Blizzard game and that we built it for that platform from the ground up.

So much of the Diablo experience, especially for Diablo III, is tied up in the online experience. Many of the console platform holders – particularly Microsoft – have been a bear to work with on network structure. Do you foresee any problems there?
I expect a negotiation, that's for sure. That being said, when we've talked to the major console providers, they've been eager to work with us. Everyone wants to see Blizzard on consoles happen, and they are some of the most eager. So, I'm hopeful. It's hard for me to say beyond that.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994
MOD LIFE
Wilson begins experimenting with game design doing Doom mods, including a popular one that replicated the movie theater where he worked

1994
THREE DIMENSIONS
3D Realm's Scott Miller offering him a job at its subsidiary Q Studios, where he was hired by Nick Newhard. He accepts the position and moves to Seattle

1996
MONOLITHIC
3D Realms is acquired by Monolith, where Wilson works on the expansion pack Blood II: The Chosen

1999
HARD LUCK
Wilson takes a position at developer Cavedog, just in time to witness the company's implosion. After a period of unemployment, he takes a brief position at EA

2000
NEW CHAPTER
After a sabbatical from video games, Wilson moves to Relic Entertainment

2002
IMPOSSIBLE SUCCESS
Wilson's first project for Relic, Impossible Creatures, is a critical success and experiences solid sales

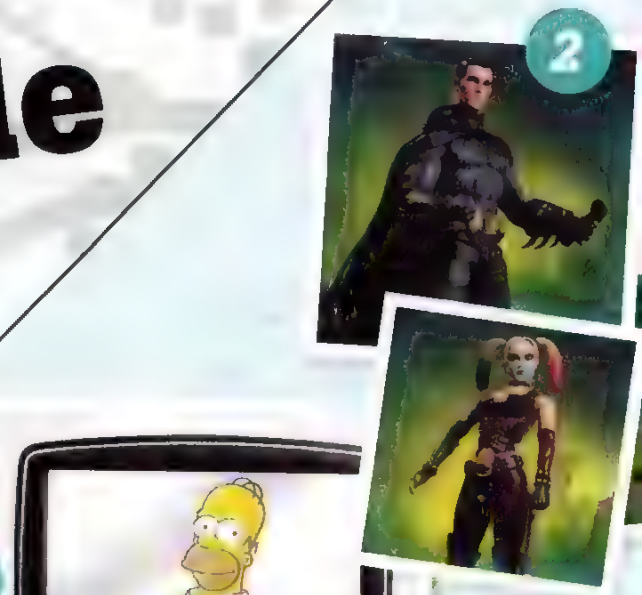
2004
AT WAR
Wilson, a fan of tabletop games, gets the chance to work on Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War. The game is a great success

2005
DREAM PROJECT
After contributing work to Company of Heroes for Relic, Wilson accepts a position at Blizzard to head up his dream project, Diablo III

2011 Holiday Buying Guide

By Jess Graves and Kyle Pinkerd

IT'S MALL SANTA SEASON, and that means it's time to start doing your holiday shopping. Need some help working up a list? We've got you covered. Here are the hottest geeky gadgets and gizmos of 2011. Sell some of those old comics and take out a personal bank loan, because you have a lot to buy. You might even find something on this list you'll want to give to someone else – so buy two.



1 The Simpsons TomTom GPS Voices If the default TomTom voices telling you to make a U-turn aren't providing enough comic relief, maybe Homer or Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons* could help turn things around. Both characters are available to purchase online. Original voice actors Dan Castellaneta and Harry Shearer stepped into the recording booth to make sure that your future commutes will be as authentic as possible. *$12.99; simpsons.tomtom.com* **2 Batman Arkham City Action Figure Series 01** We liked Arkham City quite a bit, awarding it the rare 10 out of 10, so the opportunity to display some of the characters from the game in your house is one that shouldn't be passed up. You can pick between cowl-less Batman, Harley Quinn or armored Robin. *$17.99; dccomics.com/dcdirect* **3 Life of George** No, Life of George isn't a LEGO biopic of George Washington (though that would be awesome). Life of George is a new LEGO experience that integrates



with your iOS device, allowing you to capture and score your creations. George takes you on a tour around the world as he challenges you to a series of one- or two-player building exercises. Build them quickly and capture your handiwork using your iPhone's camera to measure your building skills. ***$29.99; george.lego.com***

4 Walking Dead Figures Comic author Robert Kirkman has been vocal about his intention to create a zombie story that never ends, and he's on schedule. The second season of *The Walking Dead* is full swing, and the comic book seems set to continue on for the rest of eternity. Whether you're a fan of the comic, or the show, or both, McFarlane Toys has you covered. You can choose from television or comic versions of Officer Rick Grimes, the show version of Daryl Dixon (complete with a bust of dead squirrels), or the comic character Michonne (complete with zombie decapitating samurai sword!) from the comic. ***$19.99; spawn.com/toys***

MEDIA SHELF

MUSIC



Batman: Arkham City The Album
$9.68
watertower-music.com



Between the Buried and Me *The Parallax: Hypersleep Dialogues*
$8.99
metalblade.com/btbam/



Drake *Take Care*
$11.99
drizzydrake.org



Feist *Metals*
$9.99
listentofeist.com



Mastodon *Hunter Limited Deluxe Edition*
$16.20
mastodonrocks.com



Muppets: The Green Album
$11.88
muppetsmusic.com



Scott Weiland *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*
$11.36
scottweiland.com

$30–$100

You Care A Little



1 Mortal Kombat Cardboard Standups These life-size cardboard representations of Mortal Kombat characters look as imposing as interdimensional warriors, but they're really as harmless as a cat's toy. Manufacturer Advanced Graphics has produced standups based on Ermac, Goro, Kitana, Smoke, Reptile, Scorpion, Sonya, Sub-Zero, and each character stands approximately 70 inches tall. Terrorize your friends and family by hiding these around corners and in dark areas of the basement. *$34.95; advancedgraphics.com/store* **2 Mass Effect SSV Normandy Ship Replica** What's this? A spaceship for ants? It should be noted from the get-go that this replica of Mass Effect's commander starship only sits 6.25 inches long. But don't let its petite size fool you—your apartment will be safer with the Normandy patrolling the darkest corners of your bookshelf. *$34.99; darkhorse.com*

3 Elder Sign Dice Game The Ancient Ones' return is imminent. Armed with dice and scrolls, you must race against time and stave them off. From the designers of Arkham Horror, this fast-paced cooperative dice game will test the sanity and stamina of up to eight people. *$34.99; fantasyflightgames.com* **4 Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Beginner Box** The excellent Pathfinder role-playing game could lose its appeal to all but the most enthusiastic geeks by the system can be daunting to newcomers. The Beginner Box offers an excellent introduction to the game and includes lots of goodies, from a full set of dice to pre-made characters to quick-start rules and an attractive play mat on which to host those first epic battles. *$34.99; paizo.com/pathfinderRPG*

5 Squid Kids D'oh Figurines The labels to some of these anthropomorphized NES cartridges are a product of user submitted art and the talented artists at Squid Kids Ink. All nine versions of the figure stand nine inches tall. They're

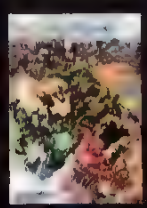
BOOKS



1Q84 by Haruki Murakami
$30.50
randomhouse.com



Batman: Hush Unwrapped Deluxe by Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee
$39.99
dccomics.com



Brightest Day, Vol. 1 by Geoff Johns and Various Artists
$29.99
dccomics.com



Bumble-Ardy by Maurice Sendak
$17.95
harpercollins.com



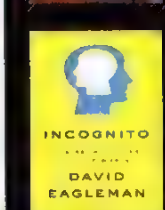
Classic Home Video Games, 1989–1990 by Brett Weiss
$55.00
mcfarlandpub.com



Cult of LEGO by John Baichtal and Joe Meno
$39.95
nostarch.com/cultoflego



Hardcoregaming101.net Presents: The Guide to Classic Graphic Adventures
$27.00
hardcoregaming101.net



Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain by David Eagleman
$26.99
eagleman.com/incognito



Life Itself: A Memoir
by Roger Ebert
$27.99
hachettebookgroup.com



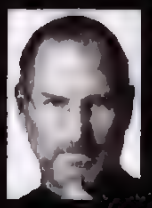
Nursery Rhyme Comics: 50 Tuneless Rhymes from 50 Celebrated Cartoonists
$18.99
us.macmillan.com



Ready Player One
by Ernest Cline
$24.00
randomhouse.com



Star Trek Vault: 40 Years from the Archives
by Scott Tipton
$40.00
abramsbooks.com



Steve Jobs
by Walter Isaacson
$35.00
books.simonandschuster.com



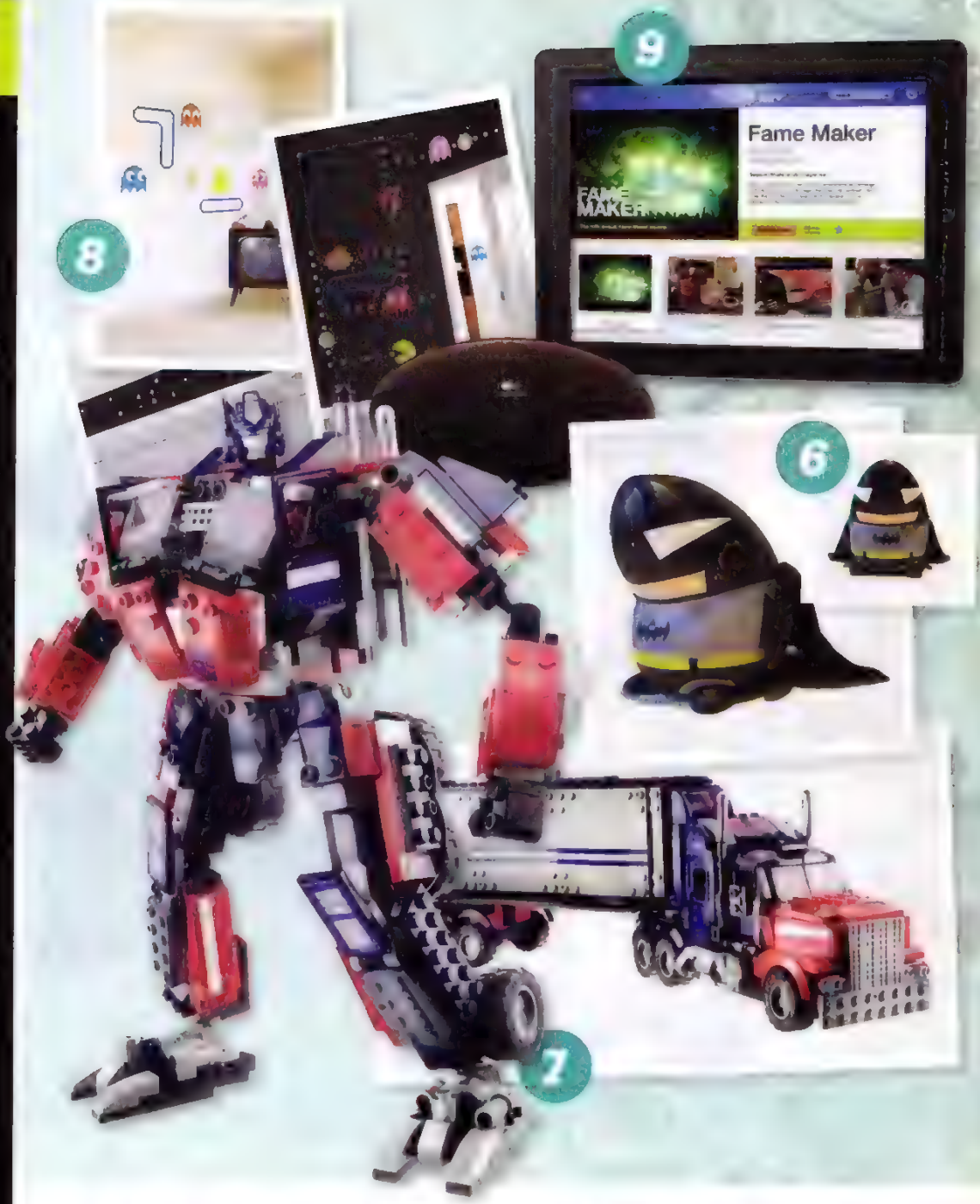
Super iam8bit: More Art Inspired by Classic Videogames of the '80s
$24.98
store.iam8bit.com



X-Men by Chris Claremont and Jim Lee Omnibus - Volume 1
$125.00
marvel.com



Zone One
by Colson Whitehead
$25.99
randomhouse.com



$75.00 whatisblik.com/shop

6 Batbaby Sharky Vinyl Figure
$47.99; toyqube.com

7 RRE-0 Transformers Optimus Prime Construction Set
$59.99; hasbro.com/transformers

8 Pac-Man Blik
line your whole house with them. It's your life. *$75.00; whatisblik.com/shop*

9 Logitech Harmony Link
$99.99; logitech.com

$100-$300

You Care A Lot



1 Star Wars Wallpaper [illegible] *$120.00; super7store.com* **2 Powerbag Messenger Bags** [illegible] *$139.99; mypowerbag.com* **3 Santa Cruz Duff Skateboard** [illegible] *$159.99; mfgbysc.com/simpsons* **4 Mortal Kombat Figures** [illegible] *$164.99; sycocollectibles.com*
5 Kisai Rogue Touch LED Watch [illegible]

TV & MOVIES



The Adventures Of Tintin: Season One
$19.93
shoutfactorystore.com



Assassin's Creed: Lineage
$15.95
assassinscreedlineage.us.ubi.com



Aqua Unit Patrol Squad 1 V.1
$29.98
adultswim.com



Batman Year One
$24.98
wbshop.com



Doctor Who: The Complete 6th Series
$89.99
doctorwho.bbcamerica.com



Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, Part 5 – August 8
$54.99
funimation.com



Harry Potter: The Complete Collection Years 1-7
$139.99
wbshop.com



The League: Season Two
$29.99
fxnetworks.com



Jurassic Park Ultimate Trilogy Gift Set
$119.99
nbcuniversalstore.com



Mad Men: Season Four
$49.99
amctv.com



Pearl Jam: Twenty
$29.99
pj20.com



Professor Layton and the Eternal Diva
$19.98
viz.com



Robot Chicken: Season Five
$39.99
adultswim.com



Star Wars: The Clone Wars: The Complete Season Three
$59.99
cartoonnetwork.com



Transformers Prime: Darkness Rising
$14.99
shoutfactorystore.com



Super 8
$44.99
paramount.com

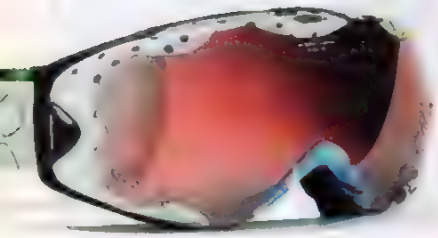


S179.99; tokyoflash.com **6 Kindle Fire** *S199. amazon.com/kindlefire* **7 Apple iPhone 4S** *Starting at S199 (with two-year contract); apple.com/iphone* **8 Nike ID Lebron 9 Shoes** *S206.00; nikeid.com* **9 Cantina Blues And Other Robot Art Prints** *S225.00-500.00; ericjoyner.com*

$300–$1,000

You Want To Have Their Babies









1 Wolf Link and Midna Statue *$329.99; first4figures.com*

2 Recon Mod Live Ski Goggles *$399.99, reconinstruments.com* **3 Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1** *$499.99 (Wi-fi only), $629.99 (Verizon 4G), samsung.com* **4 Nikon 1 J1** *$649.95; nikon.com*

VIDEO GAME COLLECTOR'S BUNDLES



The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword Bundle
$69.99



Batman: Arkham City Collector's Edition
$99.99



Star Wars: The Old Republic Collector's Edition
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$69.99



Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception Collector's Edition
$99.99



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Collector's Edition
$149.99

$1,000 AND UP

You're Not Getting Them Back... But You Can Try



1 Alienware M18x Laptop We [illegible] its big brother has all the M14x's features but [illegible] your games on it properly. It has [illegible] you set it this way with either NVIDIA SLI or AMD CrossFireX technologies [illegible] Extreme processor puts many desktops to shame. The M18x's [illegible] appreciate the system's access HD [illegible] let you wirelessly stream video content [illegible] your home. *Starting at $1,999.99; alienware.com*

2 Gibson Firebird X Limited Edition Robot Guitar [illegible] the Firebird is the first smartphone of guitars. It has great battery life, Bluetooth [illegible] and [illegible] software. There's [illegible] be able to create personalized software for it that [illegible] a wide array of sound effects and [illegible] without the need for added accessories. For this sticker price, the guitar tunes itself and comes packed in a case that can survive a Sox story fall. *$5,570.00; gibson.com* **3 Sony Bravia 65-inch HX929 Smart TV** The Sony Bravia line is known for producing deeper blacks and richer colors than [illegible] 3D. Yeah, TVs. Sony's newest 65-inch system is also thinner than a dictionary and [illegible] Corona, which makes it harder to crack than a coconut. The system's 240 Hz refresh rate is perfect for gaming and its [illegible] W-Fi lets you connect to at least 9 internet video sites from the comfort of your couch. *$5,999.99; store.sony.com* **4 Battlestar Galactica Life-Size Cylon Figure** Face it. Machines will eventually become the dominant species. We might as well start making friends now. This life-sized replica of a *Battlestar Galactica* Cylon [illegible] seven feet tall and emits the same [illegible] lights and eerie hum of its more mobile brethren. This [illegible] is sure to impress fellow Battlestar fans, terrify your dog, and shame your spouse. It's a small price to pay, for unity. *$7,999.99; sideshowtoy.com*

The Essentials

The games from this generation that you shouldn't miss

Every console has its icons – games that define the system. Whether you're new to gaming or an experienced pro, you want to experience the best your hobby has to offer. That's why we put together this definitive guide to the best entertainment this console generation has to offer.

OPEN WORLD

How many adventures will you have across these sprawling hills? How many buried secrets will you discover? The world is yours to explore.





Grand Theft Auto IV

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: 10

RELEASED: 4/29/2008



The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 3/20/2006



Fallout 3

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 10/28/2008



Assassin's Creed series

PS3 · 360

HIGHLIGHT: Assassin's Creed II

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 11/17/2009



Red Dead Redemption

PS3 · 360

SCORE: 9.75

RELEASED: 5/18/2010



Infamous series

PS3

HIGHLIGHT: Infamous 2

SCORE: 8.75

RELEASED: 6/7/2011

SHOOTERS

You have steady hands and a true aim. When the battlefield lights up, you come alive. As you take aim and fire, you feel like the gun is an extension of your arm.





Call of Duty series

PS3 · 360 · PC

HIGHLIGHT: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

SCORE: 10

RELEASED: 11/5/2007



Battlefield series

PS3 · 360 · PC

HIGHLIGHT: Battlefield 3

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 10/25/2011



BioShock series

PS3 · 360 · PC

HIGHLIGHT: BioShock

SCORE: 10

RELEASED: 8/21/2007



The Orange Box

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: 9.75

RELEASED: 10/9/2007



Halo: Reach

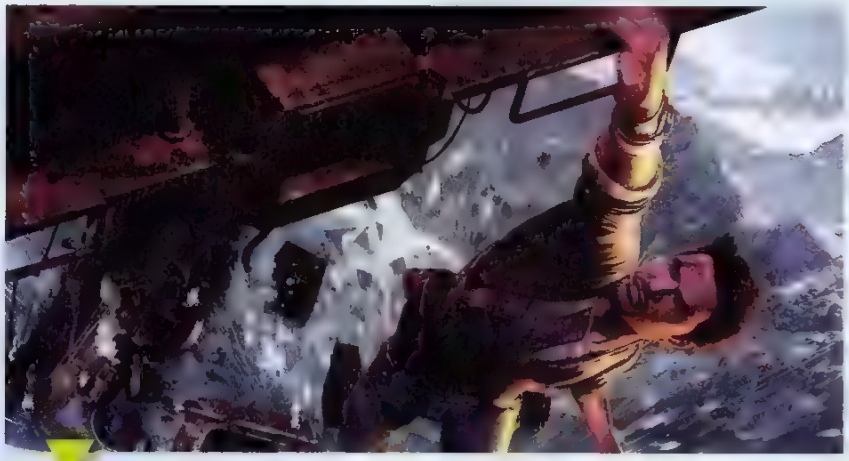
360

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 9/14/2010

ACTION/ADVENTURE

You live for the thrill, and you don't crack easily under pressure. Life is one big rollercoaster and you want to ride it again and again and again.





Uncharted series
PS3
HIGHLIGHT: Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 10/13/2009



Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
PS3
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 6/12/2008



The Legend of Zelda series
Wii
HIGHLIGHT: The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 11/20/2011



Heavy Rain
PS3
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 2/23/2010



Batman series
PS3 · 360 · PC
HIGHLIGHT: Batman: Arkham City
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 10/18/2011



Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
PS3 · 360
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 10/5/2010



Cave Story
Wii · DS
SCORE: 8.75
RELEASED: 3/22/2010



Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow
DS
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 10/21/2008



Shadow Complex
360
SCORE: N/A
RELEASED: 8/19/2009



God of War series
PSP · PS3
HIGHLIGHT: God of War III
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 3/16//2010



Ratchet & Clank series
PS3
HIGHLIGHT: Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 10/27/2009



Pinball FX 2
360
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 10/27/2010

RPG

Nothing feels nobler than an epic quest. You may not be equipped for every obstacle that stands before you, but you're willing to learn.





Mass Effect series
PS3 · 360 · PC
HIGHLIGHT: Mass Effect 2
SCORE: 9.75
RELEASED: 1/26/2010



Dragon Age: Origins
PC
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 11/3/2009



Final Fantasy XIII
PS3 · 360
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 3/9/2010



Fable II
360
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 10/21/2008



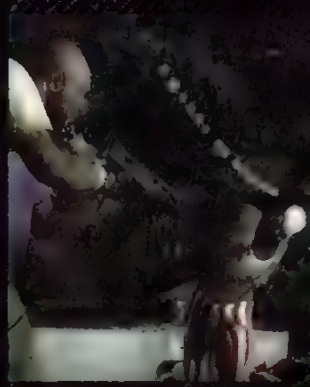
Lost Odyssey
360
SCORE: 8.5
RELEASED: 2/12/2008



World of Warcraft
PC
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 11/23/2004

CO-OP

No man is an island, and you're no lone wolf. Any adventure you can have alone isn't an adventure worth having.



Left 4 Dead series
360 · PC
HIGHLIGHT: Left 4 Dead 2
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 11/17/2009



Borderlands
PS3 · 360 · PC
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 10/20/2009



Dead Island
PS3 · PC
SCORE: 8.5
RELEASED: 9/6/2011

SPORTS

This isn't just a game; it's sport. It's not just entertainment; it's a test. Only in competition can you discover your true worth.



NBA 2K12

PS3 · 360 · Wii · PC

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 10/4/2011

Fight Night Champion

PS3 · 360

SCORE: 9

RELEASED: 3/1/2011

NHL 12

PS3 · 360

SCORE: 8.75

RELEASED: 9/13/2011

MLB 11: The Show

PS3

SCORE: 9.25

RELEASED: 3/8/2011

FIFA 12

PS3 · 360 · Wii · PC

SCORE: 9

RELEASED: 9/27/2011

Punch-Out!!

Wii

SCORE: 9

RELEASED: 5/18/2009

RACING

You love the smell of burning tires and the press of wind against your skin, but nothing compares to the feeling of knowing that, at any moment, you could lose control.

Forza Motorsport series

360

HIGHLIGHT: Forza Motorsport 4

SCORE: 9.25

RELEASED: 10/11/2011

Gran Turismo 5

PS3

SCORE: 9

RELEASED: 11/24/2010

Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: 8.75

RELEASED: 11/16/2010

Burnout series

PS3 · 360 · PC

HIGHLIGHT: Burnout Revenge

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 9/13/2005

Mario Kart series

Wii · DS

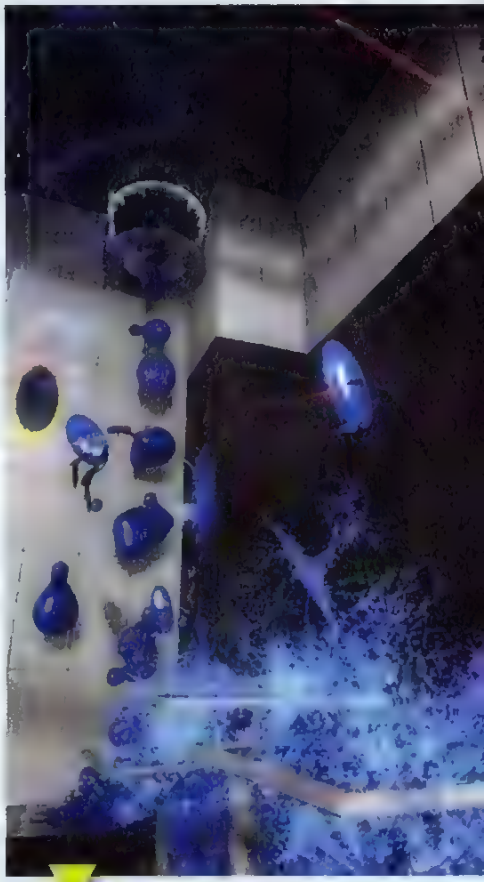
HIGHLIGHT: Mario Kart DS

SCORE: 8.5

RELEASED: 11/14/2005

PUZZLE

Riddles, brainteasers, and mysteries are rarely left unsolved. How long can the toughest puzzle stand up to the power locked inside your head?



Portal series

PS3 · 360 · PC

HIGHLIGHT: Portal 2

SCORE: 9.5

RELEASED: 4/19/2011

Braid

PS3 · 360 · PC

SCORE: N/A

RELEASED: 8/6/2008

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords

PS3 · 360 · PC · Wii

PSP · DS · iOS

SCORE: 8.25

RELEASED: 3/16/2007

Professor Layton series

DS

HIGHLIGHT: Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box

SCORE: 8.25

RELEASED: 8/24/2009





Lumines II
PSP
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 11/6/2006



Ilomilo
360
SCORE: 8.75
RELEASED: 1/5/2011



Limbo
PS3 · 360 · PC
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 7/21/2010



Picross 3D
DS
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 5/3/2010

STRATEGY

Winning this war won't be easy; there are a lot of moving pieces. Not everyone you know is going to make it through the battles to come, but good generals understand sacrifice.



Valkyria Chronicles series
PS3 · PSP
HIGHLIGHT: Valkyria Chronicles
SCORE: 8.5
RELEASED: 11/4/2008



Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions
PSP
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 5/10/2007



Plants vs. Zombies
PS3 · 360 · DS · PC
iOS · Android
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 5/5/2009



Civilization V
PC
SCORE: 9.75
RELEASED: 9/21/2010



Total Warfare: Shogun 2
PC
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 3/15/2011



Starcraft II
PC
SCORE: 10
RELEASED: 7/27/2010

PLATFORMING

The world is full of dangers, but you bound over them with wild abandon. Nothing can keep you down; you just want to see how high you can climb.



Super Mario Bros. DS
DS
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 5/15/2006



LittleBigPlanet series
PS3 · PSP
HIGHLIGHT: LittleBigPlanet 2
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 1/18/2011



Super Meat Boy
360 · PC
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 10/20/2010



Super Mario Galaxy series
Wii
HIGHLIGHT: Super Mario Galaxy
SCORE: 9.75
RELEASED: 11/12/2007



Donkey Kong Country Returns
Wii
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 11/21/2010



Kirby's Epic Yarn
Wii
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 10/17/2010

FIGHTING

Talking doesn't settle every dispute; some arguments must be settled with fists. Your competition looks tough. They've been training hard – but so have you.



Super Street Fighter IV
PS3 · 360 | **SCORE:** 9 **RELEASED:** 4/27/2010

Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Wii | **SCORE:** 9.5 **RELEASED:** 3/9/2008

Mortal Kombat
PS3 · 360 | **SCORE:** 9.5 **RELEASED:** 4/19/2011

Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds
PS3 · 360 | **SCORE:** 9.25 **RELEASED:** 2/15/2011

SURVIVAL HORROR

Your heart races; something shuffles across the floor behind you. You're paralyzed. But you must press on; your survival depends on it.



Dead Space series
PS3 · 360 · PC
HIGHLIGHT: Dead Space 2
SCORE: 9
RELEASED: 1/25/2011



Amnesia: The Dark Descent
PC
SCORE: 9.25
RELEASED: 9/8/2010



Resident Evil 5
PS3 · 360
SCORE: 9.5
RELEASED: 3/5/2009

MUSIC/RHYTHM

Your life has a soundtrack, and your feet can't help but tap to its beat. Maybe the world would be a better place if we all danced to your rhythms.



Guitar Hero series
PS3 · 360 · Wii | **HIGHLIGHT:** Legends of Rock
SCORE: 8.75 **RELEASED:** 10/28/2007

DJ Hero series
PS3 · 360 · Wii | **HIGHLIGHT:** DJ Hero
SCORE: 9.25 **RELEASED:** 10/19/2010

Rock Band series
PS3 · 360 · Wii | **HIGHLIGHT:** Rock Band 3
SCORE: 9.25 **RELEASED:** 10/26/2010

Dance Central
360 | **SCORE:** 8.75 **RELEASED:** 11/4/2010

The Future of Media

by Brandon Sanderson
Author

I remember how I felt when I first played Final Fantasy VII. I suspect my reaction was not unique – I came out of that game feeling, for the first time, like I'd played a movie.

I think that's the first inkling I had of what was to come, what is still coming. More and more, it seems that traditional lines between entertainment media – film, book, game, song – are blending together. I think that video games hold the future of what we might call the "uber-media" form. The combination of all traditional arts into a single experience, mixed with the new art of the 20th century – the art of guided participation.

To break it down in a more specific form, one of my favorite games of recent years was Batman: Arkham Asylum. The game mixed theatric presentation in the wonderful voice acting, beautiful pieces of visual art in dynamic set pieces, a beautifully haunting soundtrack, and some stellar storytelling on multiple levels – including text-driven pieces in some of the unlockables and discoverables. The final package, however, was made ever the more awesome by the fact that it actually made me feel like I was Batman.

I'd seen plenty of Batman adaptations, from the awesome to the corny. I'd read comic books, and I'd played a number of Batman games. In most of those, honestly, Batman could have been Mario, and it wouldn't have changed anything. Not now. In the new media that video games are becoming, story, atmosphere, voice acting, and gameplay become inseparable.

I think there will always be a place for books, films, and other art forms. However, I'd bet that eventually, the video game (or some future iteration of it) will become the dominant media form. As it does, I think it is important for those of us in other storytelling fields to pay attention, and maybe even change the way we look at games and game writing.

There has been a lot of talk recently about the possibility of releasing enhanced e-books – books where certain sections are set to music, or that cut into video for a short time. While I'm curious about these possibilities, I see them more as individually interesting projects rather than as the future of the book. I don't think the book is going to evolve; the book works as it is. I don't think that most readers pick up a book wanting a multimedia experience.



More importantly, we already have a storytelling form that is good at blending genres. It was built to blend genres. Recently, I've started dipping my toes into the video game world to see what kind of storytelling boundaries can be pushed here. What I've done has inspired some questioning. People wonder why a bestselling author would bother with a video game adaptation. (I recently released a bridge novel between two games in the Infinity Blade game franchise from Chair Entertainment.)

My answer is simple. I didn't become a novelist to become a bestseller. I became a novelist to tell stories. This is a new way to tell stories, and I want to see what it can do. Though people have been playing with joint video game and book projects for decades now, in modern e-readers we finally have a device where you can switch between game and book effortlessly. We now have the same distribution model in digital downloads. We can release a super-package, where a fan can buy – in one download – a film, a parallel book that shows the story from another character's viewpoint, a game that lets you play the prequel to the film, and the soundtrack. You could experience each of these things on the same device.

That's exciting to me, but I also think that there are cautions to be had here. While most video game players enjoy good writing, not all of them want to sit down to read a novel. I think storytelling in games should push more toward what we've seen in Arkham Asylum and the Infamous series, as opposed to where we saw the JRPGs go in the early 2000s. By that, I mean that we have the technical skill to have motion and action while we give narrative. I'd like to see game storytellers stop the game less frequently, and deliver story alongside action, with blurbs of dialogue and exposition happening in-game rather than in extended cutscenes. Going one step further and stopping the game to say "Now, here, read this" would be the wrong move.

However, I know that I've experienced that feeling of satisfaction mixed with sadness at finishing a good game. If there were a book that expanded on the story, one I could pick up right then – while the feelings were strongest – I'd often like to give the story a chance.

To this regard, there are a few things I'd like to see. First: Fewer novelizations, more expanded story. This is mostly a suggestion for Hollywood, as video game companies seem to get it (most novelizations I've seen are expansions on the game, not a retread of the same story). Still, I think the point needs to be made. Hybrid media, like we're talking about here, should be less about making us experience the same story over and over and more about expanding the story.

Second: Let's keep pushing video game writing to be better. We've had a string of good games, writing-wise, lately. However, I feel that for most games, the writing is still given the lowest rung on the ladder (I'm looking at you, Borderlands – with an exception for whoever wrote Scooter's dialogue). A great story will not compensate for bad gameplay, but if games really want to come to dominate, they'll need the lasting emotional impact that powerful characters, sharp dialogue, and a compelling narrative can give. Note, however, that if you want good writers, you're going to have to pay for them – rather than farming out dialogue to whomever in the company feels like it at the time.

Third: To all of the writers out there, we have to stop thinking of video game writing as "slumming." I shouldn't need to say this, but there's a feel that anyone who works on an adaptation – particularly for a game – is somehow selling out. We have to change the way we view different media forms. No writer is considered to be a hack if he decides to write a screenplay; screenplays are somehow seen as more respectable than video game work. This shouldn't be.

I'm very excited for what video gaming can become in the future, as it continues to consume all media forms and put out something new and innovative. I hope I can dive more fully into this myself, but in the meantime, I'm going to play Arkham City.

Brandon Sanderson is the author of Infinity Blade: Awakening, Elantris, the Mistborn trilogy, and the final three volumes of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series.

timeline



















December

2011

02 Required New 52 Reading

DC Comics' amazing universe reboot "New 52" enters its fourth month, and Game Informer staffers have been following it closely (Reiner has read every issue). Rather than highlighting just one title as we usually do, we're giving you a checklist of our favorite books. Check these out if you want to get into this universe: *Detective Comics, Swamp Thing, Superboy, Action Comics, Animal Man, Justice League, Suicide Squad, Green Lantern, Catwoman, Aquaman,* and *Wonder Woman.*

05 Get Your Bananas Ready

The Nintendo 3DS' first year concludes today with the release of Mario Kart 7. Despite the generic numbered title, this entry introduces a slew of new concepts to the circuit, including gliding wings and propellers for underwater exploration. We would have called it Mario Kart: Wing Fish or Mario Kart: Flying Tuna.

06 New Releases

- The Adventures of TinTin *(PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS)*
- F1 2011 *(3DS)*
- Fortune Street *(Wii)*
- Deadliest Warrior *(PS3, 360)*
- Just Dance 3 *(PS3)*
- My Pet Puppy 3D *(3DS)*

07 The Comic Darksider

If you're a fan of Darksiders' art direction, you may want to check out Marvel Comics' hottest new series. *The Avenging Spider-Man*, which features the talents of Vigil Games' Joe Madureira. This book focuses on Spider-Man being a member of the Avengers and dealing with large superhero conflicts. The debut issue was the first comic book to come packaged with a free digital download of the same issue, much like movies' DVD/Blu-ray/digital download packages.

10 Pinker Than Pink

Final Fantasy XIII-2 doesn't hit store shelves until January 31, but players can pick up the Lightning figure based on this game starting today. We doubt Lightning's hair will be as overwhelmingly pink in the game, but on a collector's shelf it will make her stand out.

16 The Game is Afoot...Again

Batman may be the world's greatest detective, but Sherlock Holmes is the world's greatest non-billionaire detective. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* opens today, finally introducing Holmes' arch nemesis Dr. Moriarty. Expect mind-bending riddles, slow-motion fist fights, and gratuitous drug use. It's like spending the weekend with William S. Burroughs.

20 Time To Cancel The Holidays

In a move that is sure to tear families apart, Electronic Arts and BioWare release Star Wars: The Old Republic, a sprawling PC MMORPG, today – just four days before gamers are asked to socialize outside of their online communities. Four days is barely enough time to create a character. If you're asking a loved one for a gift this year, ask for blocks of game time on December 24 and 25.

21 Dragon Unicorn Protocol

Today marks the release of three notable films: *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo, Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol,* and *The Adventures of TinTin: Secrets of the Unicorn.* Based on the trailers, Mission Impossible will be the best of the three, but if you like book-to-movie-to-another-movie adaptations, Dragon Tattoo also looks cool. The Adventures of TinTin – well, it has "Unicorn" in the name, so it's only for babies, nerds, and Ren Fest dorks.

25 That Horse Is Going To Die

Not everyone celebrates Christmas, but who could pass up the opportunity to see Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* today? It's an emotional tale of love and war revolving around a horse! Most movies like this end with the animal's tear-jerking death, and we wouldn't bet on this one being any different. Hopefully the horse goes down in a blaze of glory, like after kicking Seabiscuit in the nuts or galloping into a lava lake to save Woodrow Wilson.

28 Nathan Drake's Adventure Continues

By now you've probably completed Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception and are going through withdrawals. DC Comics has just the thing for you: An all-new Uncharted story! In this comic book series Nathan Drake hunts for the "Amber Room," which many believe contains over six tons of amber lost during World War II. This journey apparently takes Nathan into the heart of the planet.


THE ENEMY WITHIN

Americans are angry

And why shouldn't they be? With an exponentially expanding national debt, crippling foreclosures, corporate bailouts, degrading infrastructure, dwindling job market, and widening income gap between the haves and have-nots, it's getting harder to believe politicians when they speak of American exceptionalism as if it were a fundamental truth.

In response to gradual erosion of our beloved nation, resentful citizens of all kinds of political backgrounds are rising up in the form of new political movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. But unlike the 1960s, when protests and activism resulted in the discontinuation of the military draft, the Civil Rights Act, and the sexual revolution, the contemporary bickering government parties have proven largely ineffective at slowing or reversing the downward trajectory.

The media isn't helping matters. Rather than promote discussions about viable solutions moving forward, ad-driven 24-hour media outlets and radio programs are content to stoke the fires and sensationalize political differences. History proves that if leaders don't move swiftly to address these grievances, the rage can sometimes find a more violent channel of expression. Case in point: the meteoric rise of militias over the past few years.

In 2009, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported a massive resurgence in anti-government paramilitary groups, which have jumped from 43 militias in 2007 to nearly 300 in 2010. The sudden surge has captured the attention of the Department of Homeland Security, NSA, CIA, and FBI, who all view these groups as a real threat to the stability of the nation. Moreover, many of these disenfranchised groups frequently put their members through intense military training exercises – for what, no one knows.

America's volatile political climate serves as the jumping-off point for Rainbow 6 Patriots. This latest game in the storied tactical shooter series eschews the exhausted Russian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern crises so common in contemporary shooters and challenges gamers' perceptions by placing them in the roles of the elite tactical unit, the homegrown terrorists, and the civilians caught in the crossfire. Do you have what it takes to pull the trigger on a fellow citizen?

- **Platforms:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
- **Style:** 1-Player Shooter, 16-Player Online
- **Publisher:** Ubisoft
- **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal
- **Release:** 2013

You've fought Nazi, Russian, North Korean, and Middle Eastern threats. Rainbow 6 Patriots asks, can you turn the weapon on your fellow countrymen?

by Matt Bertz & Jeff Cork





Ubisoft used to call the series Rainbow Six, but when the cool new logo was created, the marketing team decided to change the name to Rainbow 6

THE RETURN TO DUTY

Given the state of the shooter market, Rainbow Six has a lot of catching up to do. Though the popular franchise has always fared well critically, it's been three years since we last saw it in action. Over that time period, the popularity of the genre has exploded to the point that one game, Call of Duty: Black Ops, has sold as many copies (23 million) as the entirety of the Rainbow Six series.

Whereas once Rainbow Six ranked among the best shooters in both story campaign and multiplayer, Call of Duty is now the gold standard. Battlefield's successful conversion from a PC exclusive to a multi-console property gives war buffs another elite option as well. So how do you recapture mind share from these highly successful properties?

To honor the Rainbow Six legacy and return the franchise to prominence, the development team at Ubisoft Montreal knows it needs to make a splash. Picking up the story where it left off in Rainbow Six Vegas 2 was a non-starter. "The story is particularly important to us this time," admits creative director David Sears. "We know from post-launch consumer data that most people couldn't remember who the characters were, why they were there, and why they were doing the things they were doing, or even what the story was all about." Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

When Sears joined the team two years ago, the United States was still in the throes of its biggest recession since the Great Depression (some argue we're still in the recession now). The anger in the nation was palpable, and Sears certainly identified with it, having lost the entirety of his 401k in two days during the economic collapse. In conducting their story research and reading up on the latest Tom Clancy books, Sears and his team realized there was no need to look outside our nation's borders for the next big threat facing the nation and Team Rainbow.



Creative director David Sears and narrative director Richard Rouse worked with Canadian filmmaker Erik Canuel and Hollywood screenwriters to storyboard the entire Rainbow 6 Patriots narrative and nail the pacing of the plot

GOING PLACES

Traditionally, Rainbow Six games involve a sense of "adventure tourism," with high stakes missions that take players to exotic locations around the globe they normally wouldn't go. Creative director David Sears assures us that just because Patriots takes places predominately in the United States, that doesn't mean the settings will be boring or conventional.

"I always point to the Salton Sea in the United States," he says. "It's a spectacular desert, a spectacular urban wasteland that's been largely forgotten by the Americans who created it in the '60s. My point is, we don't have to go to Afghanistan or Iraq to have a spectacular desert. Most of this geography and topography is available right here in North America."

Though 80 percent of the game is set in iconic locations like Pebble Beach, California and New York City, Sears says the remaining 20 percent takes players beyond the national borders to places like the Bering Strait and Poti, Georgia, a coastal city on the Black Sea.

"We knew we had to have a story this time that's very plausible, very relevant, and that touches on the current fears of U.S. citizens," Sears says.

If properly coordinated, the emerging rage-fueled paramilitary groups angered over the direction of the country could cause irreparable damage to our political and financial foundations.

"Fortunately there hasn't been a single leader to galvanize, orchestrate, and mobilize all these groups who have all this political energy and are so dissatisfied and angry," Sears said. For the sake of the next Rainbow Six story, however, Sears created him.

"Our enemies are inspired by these paramilitary groups, political radicals who we see all over YouTube, and former military men and women who have valiantly served their country but then return home and feel disenfranchised and forgotten," he says. "They don't return as heroes, and they feel like they have been neglected. These are the people who would join a movement like our terrorist group."

This new collective of militias, known as the True Patriots, is led by a charismatic figurehead named Tredway, who has seen government treachery firsthand and has information that proves it lies to its people.

"He would like to overthrow the government, but he is really smart," Sears says. "He knows that a movement begun today will not necessarily result in a conclusive and lasting change tomorrow. What makes him particularly dangerous is that he is willing to martyr himself for this cause. By becoming a martyr, he firmly believes that his actions will reverberate throughout future history so that people will look at him as a founding father of a new country in which people have embraced the civil liberties that are granted to them in the Constitution."

The main targets of Tredway's ire are the government and financial institutions, which he sees colluding at the detriment of the common man. To overthrow the corrupt leaders of the nation, he aspires to behead corporate America.

Stopping Tredway won't be easy, because the True Patriots don't operate like your traditional terrorist organization. Unlike the foreign threats from overseas, Tredway has a standing army of trained insurgents who look, act, and talk just like everyone else in America. Rather than take up arms against the military directly, the Patriots conduct strategic strikes when an opportunity arises, then disappear back into everyday society. As this implies, it is a very agile organization. By simply sending a text message, Tredway can have a flash mob of insurgency fighters anywhere in the United States at almost any time.

"Why can't a game be smarter? Why can't a game embrace issues? We're not coming down with any kind of ruling or judgment about any of this. We're letting people talk amongst themselves."

– *creative director David Sears*

But the True Patriots aren't just a hard-to-catch enemy. For the first time in the series, you don't just play from the perspective of the elite Team Rainbow outfit. Players also take the role of a True Patriot. Shifting perspective to give readers or viewers insight into the motivations and beliefs of multiple sides of the story is a common technique used in novels and films, but is rarely seen in video games.

"We very often see terrorists as a caricature of humanity," Sears explains, "but they're really people. Even if we completely disagree with their ideology – and certainly we disagree with the terrorist actions they are taking. No one wants to be shot or blown up."

Unlike the controversial "No Russian" level in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, a lurid mission where players acted as an undercover CIA agent during an airport massacre, Ubisoft Montreal isn't just interested in generating shock value. The team wants to create context around these True Patriot members to give you insight into what led them to join this group.

"These people all have mothers," Sears says. "They want to be loved on some level, so we're actually stepping back and letting you get to know some of these people. It's very important to understand why they are doing the things they do, so we're taking the time to present it in a thoughtful way so that by the end of the game you've experienced a terrorist event from multiple angles.

"You'll understand better what it's like to be a terrorist, and you'll understand better what it's like to be a civilian in a terrorist event. That gives you a greater appreciation for the things that Rainbow does, particularly since when you know all these people and you've had time to connect with them and you're asked as Rainbow to make these hard ethical decisions, it's more powerful. It makes you think."

The New Face Of Team Rainbow

Since we last saw Team Rainbow, the organization has undergone a radical transformation. Just as Tom Clancy's novels have evolved as the world and terrorist threats change, the international strike team has adapted by transforming its personnel and tactics. Old-school counter-terrorism isn't an effective deterrent anymore, so new operational guidelines have been put in place. The driving force of this new direction is Zulu squad leader James Wolfe, a former Navy SEAL who fervently believes in doing whatever it takes to thwart the True Patriots.

"He sees that the True Patriots are operating by a new set of rules – it's not about making demands for something or taking a bunch of hostages and holding them for a while. It's about striking and disappearing again," says narrative director Richard Rouse. "James Wolfe realizes that to stop these guys he's going to have to push Rainbow farther than they've ever had to go before and make some really tough choices to take these guys down."

"He knows that if he doesn't eliminate the True Patriots' leader swiftly, the results to the United States could be catastrophic and long-lasting," Sears adds. "In order to do this, he's willing to take ethical shortcuts. For the first time ever, Rainbow is going to show up at the site of a terrorist event before the police show up and cordon off the hotel with yellow tape."

Players take the role of Echo squad's leader, a new member of Team Rainbow who looks up to Wolfe like a father figure. But once you are in the field, you have the choice whether to adopt Wolfe's harsh tactics or go with another approach.



In previous games, allowing a civilian to die was game over. Now you're not exempt from tough situational decisions. Do you kill one civilian now and potentially spare hundreds of lives, or is the lone human life too critical to lose even if it means thousands of others may meet their untimely deaths down the road? In Patriots, you make the call.

continued on page 60



Like with id Software's Rage, Ubisoft Montreal wants the combat to feel more visceral, so it's taking measures to make sure different animations play when you shoot an enemy in the shoulder, leg, back, or front. The strength of the weapon impact on AI enemies will also be taken into account



RECAPTURING THE MULTIPLAYER CROWN

Though we haven't seen a new Rainbow Six game since 2008, Ubisoft Montreal is dead set on recapturing the series' past status as a top-tier multiplayer shooter. A lot has happened since its last appearance – namely Call of Duty became the most popular online shooter of all time – but rather than be discouraged in the face of such steep competition, the development team is encouraged by the growing popularity of the genre as a whole.

"The good news is that there are many more people now playing multiplayer than there used to be," says Rainbow 6 Patriots lead multiplayer designer Simon Larouche. Even though Rainbow Six's strategic, squad-based action is different from the more frenetic pace of a Halo or Call of Duty, Ubisoft Montreal believes Patriots delivers everything players expect from a contemporary shooter, and more.

"This is all about recapturing our online crown," says creative director David Sears. "Rainbow has often been a number one online adversarial shooter. We've been away for a little while, so we've focused a lot on updating the features we had before and adopting features that we needed to adopt to be competitive in the immediate future. We're not just catching up. We're getting ahead again."

Rainbow 6 Patriots' multiplayer is built around an interesting visual metaphor, called the HQ. This high-tech virtual space serves as an interactive, fully rendered pregame lobby where gamers can invite friends, explore squad tactics via the game's innovative new sandtable (see sidebar on page 64), sharpen skills at the firing range, tinker with weapon loadouts in the arsenal, and launch matches.

Rather than force players to navigate text-heavy menus for matchmaking, once you join a match you enter an area that the dev team calls the troop transport. Here, players can see the actual character models for their teammates and opponents before matches as they take their seats. Ubisoft says this approach makes the ordinarily dry moments before a match a bit more interesting. "It's not just a name on the screen, it's actually a 3D rendition of the player, so you can see them, you can see the cool weapon they have, their uniform, and things like that," Larouche says.

Once enough players enter the transport (by walking in from a side passage, not teleporting and breaking the sense of immersion) a familiar countdown begins and the screen rumbles as you make way to your destination.

Our multiplayer demo takes place in a large level called Waterworks. The lower portion of this abandoned structure is below the streets of New York. Its three-tiered design includes a well-lit open area ringed with stairwells, railings, and perches high above the action. Each level is color coded for easy navigation, though the paint is faded and flaked to match the rest of the dilapidated building.

In the story campaign Rainbow Six requires players to think strategically and work as a team. That approach traditionally carried over to multiplayer as well, but for Patriots, Ubisoft built in some tools to make it easier to assemble and work as a squad. The new commander and follower mechanic is similar to how squads work in most shooters, with some critical underlying differences. Ubisoft wants to encourage veteran players to mentor new recruits. When you see a player doing particularly well in the field, you can ask to be his follower. If he accepts, you then gain access to the tactical settings that he created in the sandtable. Commanders can also issue waypoints and mark targets for followers. On the mini-map, commanders not only see where their teammates are located, but can also see their cones of vision on a small radar map near the bottom of the screen. When it's time to act as a team, commanders can issue go orders and countdowns so everyone knows when it's time to breach a door or swing down from above.

The dev team revisited player movement in the campaign to make the action feel more aggressive, and this philosophy carries over to multiplayer as well. Though the game still lacks a jump button, characters can now vault over low barriers and move from cover to cover automatically. Most importantly, rappelling is finally more effective than dropping a grenade at your feet.

"We've streamlined the hell out of rappelling, so it's very, very fast," says creative director David Sears. "Rappel locations offer cover or clandestine entry oftentimes, though if you are exposed, the offensive capabilities that you have while you're in rappel balance out the risks, so the reward is quite high. It's not slow, and it's not a death sentence anymore." In a game where a single headshot almost certainly means a kill, that kind of mobility is critical.

As with a lot of multiplayer games, Rainbow Six Vegas was prone to spawn camping. A highly skilled and coordinated team could box in opponents and kill them seconds after they popped into play. Patriots adds a few options that should alleviate those frustrations. If your team is pinned down in the default base spawn point, you can reenter the game next to a teammate or in a randomized safe zone away from the base.

At the end of a match, players are greeted with a typical results screen filled with progression bars and a tally of earned medals and ribbons. In one of the nice touches added to the feedback screen, player accuracy is not only represented by a percentage, but also with an outline of a human target that's peppered with the locations of your shots. It's a nice way to provide visual feedback to a stat as important as it is boring.

We saw the deathmatch mode in action, but Ubisoft promises new modes will accompany the traditional assortment of options. When asked if some modes or levels would require players to make the same tough decisions on collateral civilian damage as in the campaign, the team only offered up a cryptic "we have plans" response. The ACES progression system introduced in Rainbow Six Vegas will return with new enhancements, as will as the popular Persistent Elite Creation customization. Ubisoft Montreal wouldn't comment on the inclusion of terrorist hunt, though it's hard to believe the team would scrap such a popular mode.

Many of the other multiplayer details are being kept under lock and keycard at this point, including the scope of co-op. Still, it's obvious from what we saw that the studio hasn't been in stasis over the past three years.





To get more soulful performances out of the characters, Ubisoft doubled the quality of source animation and is dedicating more processor time to skin shaders, fabric shaders, hair, and lighting.

"Collateral damage is unfortunate, but it's acceptable when combating terrorism now, particularly with the evolution of terrorism, which is 'strike anywhere and make no demands,'" Sears says.

For example, say a terrorist grabs a human shield in the subway system. You know he has a cell phone that can trigger multiple explosions throughout New York City, and he's positioned in such a way that you can neutralize him only by shooting through his meat shield. The True Patriots know they're forcing you into these impossible situations, and given how pervasive technology is today, if you pull the trigger and wound or kill that civilian chances are high it could end up on the evening news, severely damaging the public profile of a once-clandestine operation. What do you do?

"These are hard questions, and we do this consistently through almost every mission," Sears says.

Patriots In Action

Our live game demo doesn't start with Team Rainbow seated in the back of a chopper or outside a facility surrounded by police. Instead, our first glimpse comes from the perspective of a well-to-do real estate investor sitting in his idyllic American home. Judging by the polished wooden floors, large HDTV, and the iPad-like tablet sitting to his right, this guy is living the good life.

In walks the the man's wife, dressed only in a skimpy nightie. She turns off the TV and saunters toward him with a lit cupcake.

"Happy birthday. Go on, blow it out," she says.

Like a scene out of Heavy Rain, the player is given the option to blow out the candle or stroke his wife's cheek. The developer controlling the demonstration does both.

"You know what I wish for?" the man asks.

"Well, the baby is asleep," she replies seductively.

"Wishes do come true."

Suddenly, the doorbell rings. The woman sighs. "That's probably Dave from next door," she says. "Hold that thought."

The wife gets up to see who rang the bell, but just before she reaches for the doorknob the door bursts open. A group of men swiftly enter uninvited, knocking her to the ground.

"Get away from her!" the homeowner cries. He gets up to defend his wife but doesn't stand a chance against these rugged men. He's easily knocked out cold. When he awakens, a bearded man in a military jacket who looks to be the leader of this group walks over and puts his knife to the wife's neck. You can hear the baby crying faintly from upstairs.

"Rise and shine, birthday boy," the intruder says with a wake-up blow. "You have a very nice place here. Seems you cashed in on everyone getting foreclosed. Today, you are going to make up for that."

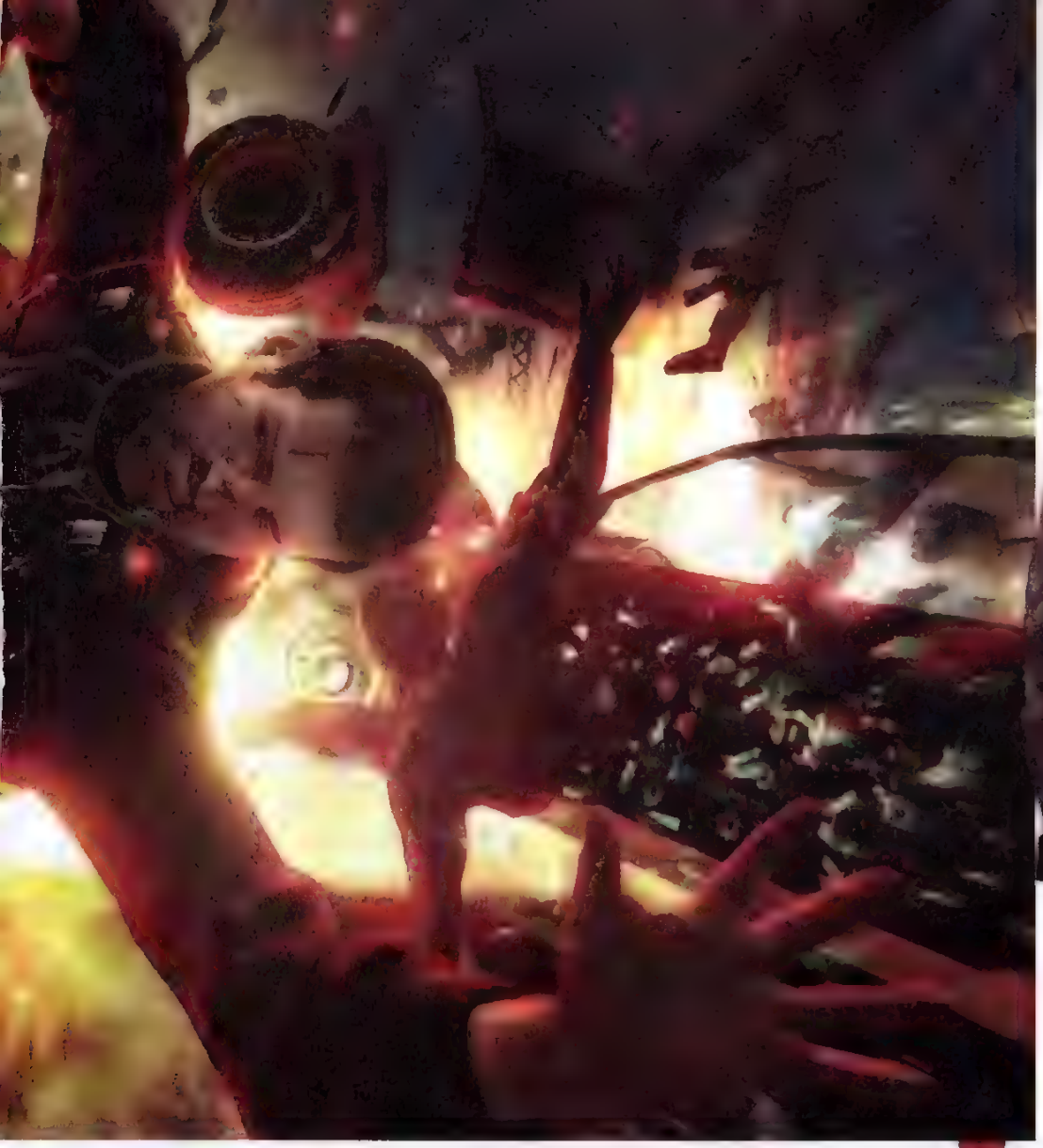
The True Patriots' concept of restitution? Strapping him into a vest lined with explosives and going on a field trip.

The scene transitions to the back of a van stuck in traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge. The ringleader of this operation hands the birthday boy a trigger and warns him that if he doesn't hold the detonator button down, he'll go up in flames. If he doesn't make it to Times Square before he releases the button, his family is dead.

"This is living the American Dream on the worst day of your life," Sears says. "The guy has everything – a kid, a wife, and a beautiful house at the expense of many other Americans. Then he experiences what is tantamount to home invasion and emotional rape. Everything is ripped away, and in order to save his family he becomes a symbolic and real weapon."

Correspondingly, the player controlling the demo has to hold this detonation button down as well for the remainder of this sequence. Before the True Patriots have a chance to get the bomber across the bridge, gunfire rings out and bullets riddle the van, hitting one of the terrorists inside, who falls on top of the bomber.







The engine powering this experience comes from an unlikely source. Ubisoft Montreal built Rainbow Six Vegas 2 with a heavily modified version of Unreal Engine 2. Instead of upgrading to Epic's latest engine for Patriots, the team chose Ubisoft's proprietary Anvil engine, made famous by Assassin's Creed. The studio undertook a huge amount of infrastructure work to retrofit the engine for the project, which explains the long break for the series.

"The team was busy turning a really cool parkour hand-to-hand combat engine into a really cool shooter engine," Sears says when asked why Rainbow Six has been absent for three years. "It's taken a lot of effort."

The Patriots pour out the back of the van and into the streets. Their leader beckons the player to remove the dead body and follow him. The scene unfolding outside the van is chaos, with civilians abandoning their cars and running for cover, car alarms blaring, and shots raining down on the van's position. As the duo moves forward under the hail of fire, a nearby car explodes, knocking the potential suicide bomber back. Luckily for his newborn baby and wife, the force of the blast doesn't trigger the explosives strapped to his chest.

Now the camera pulls out as the perspective shifts to Rainbow Six's Echo team, which is positioned with sniper rifles on the top of the Manhattan side of the bridge. Zulu squad, lead by James Wolfe, instructs Echo team to pick off terrorists from afar as they move across the bridge. Teammates call out positions of the enemies as they move into range. Going into the new scan mode, which gives players a thermal readout of the situation, it's much easier to pick out the targets.

When the bomber nears the police blockade, the cops don't see that he's strapped with explosives. With no time to get on the horn to give NYPD a heads up, the developer playing the demo chooses to plug the boys in blue in the legs to incapacitate them. Though not an ideal solution, this keeps the bomber from destroying the bridge. At least he exercised restraint – panicked players could just as easily kill the cops.

With the police blockade pacified, Echo team makes its way to ground level. This gives Ubisoft the chance to show off the new Rappel 2.5 technology powering Patriots.

"I think this is a message that reverberates with a lot of Americans right now. Certainly, as someone who lost the entirety of his 401k in two days, I'm still kind of angry. Not that it's personal, but in terms of player fantasy this is a strong one for me, and I'm betting it's a strong one for millions of others right now."

– *David Sears*

Rappelling got the job done in the Vegas titles, but it was a cumbersome process that could leave you exposed if you started your descent at the wrong time. After studying some of the pioneering rappel techniques employed by elite law enforcement teams in South Korea, Serbia, and Australia, the developers realized that these squads could do way more than they originally believed while descending from above.

"When you watch what they do in real life you think they are crazy, so of course I thought that we should let the players do this," Sears said.

Instead of a slow and methodical rappel, the new Rainbow teams move with energy and excitement down the faces of buildings and bridges. If you want, you can run down the side of the building at full speed while firing your gun on unsuspecting targets below. The transitions on and off the rope are much more fast-paced, which should make rappelling a more viable option in multiplayer as well.

Echo team rappels down the bridge in rapid fashion, picking off enemies down below as they advance. Once they reach the ground, the Patriots are firmly entrenched on the bridge behind abandoned cars, so Team Rainbow gets in tactical formation.

With the soldiers on the ground we get a better feel for how combat is evolving. Gunplay looks more aggressive than in past games, with characters slamming in and out of cover violently enough to make the cars shake.

Lead campaign gameplay designer Philippe Therien, who has worked on the series since Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow, says players should also expect an evolved control scheme. You can still use the legacy controls introduced in Rainbow Six Vegas that allow you to control when your soldier transitions from the first-person perspective into third-person in cover. But internally, most testers prefer a new control scheme. Ubisoft isn't sharing details, but Therien says it feels more in line with the contemporary shooters and transitions players in and out of cover more intuitively. The cover system also has new animations for vaulting, blind fire, and moving from cover to cover seamlessly.

Ubisoft Montreal is streamlining the tactical controls to match the faster combat pace. Shooter fans who would rather spend time firing their own weapon than issuing commands should be excited about the new one-button tactics, a smart interface that contextually determines what your team should be doing given the location of enemies and what they are doing. By placing the reticle over an environmental object like a door, your AI squad will select a smart breach and call out their intentions so you know their plans.

continued on page 65



INTO THE BREACH

Breaching and infiltration have always been hallmarks of the Rainbow Six series, and Patriots is no exception. Ubisoft Montreal is giving players even more tools to surprise and overwhelm enemies with help from their squad.

Much like the team in Ghost Recon, as technology advanced over the years Team Rainbow has gained access to new battlefield gadgets. The newest toy is the scan mode, an informational HUD inspired by the TSA airport scanners that allows its user to more easily spot threats such as firearms, which are highlighted in yellow. With scan mode a part of Rainbow's regular equipment, the days of using snake cams in front of every door are over. If you want to breach a room, turn on the intelligent technology and the scanner does the rest, outlining bodies thermally to give you a clear read on the situation. Not having to peer under each door with the snake cam gives you more time to ponder your options from a safe distance.

Ubisoft set up one mock scenario to show off this new tech and give us an idea of just how many options are available to the player for any particular breach. The setup is deceptively simple: A group of six terrorists is holed up in a garage that has three points of entry. To make the situation more volatile, there's a hostage on his knees with a shotgun-wielding thug behind him. Spook him, and the VIP is as good as dead. What do you do?



FRAG AND CLEAR
The squad assembles near the front door, quietly slides it open, and rolls a frag grenade into the garage. The blast knocks one terrorist down, and the remaining men turn and fire on the exposed Rainbow team. All of the terrorists are killed, though the hostage was also killed in the chaos. "In some rooms that might be great, that might be wonderful, but in this room it's a bad idea," says lead campaign gameplay designer Philippe Therien.

STEALTH ENTRY
The squad assembles near the front door and quietly slides it open, crouch-walking their way to cover at the player's instruction. They automatically stand up and recommend targets to the player when they're out of enemy sight, returning to cover when patrols are nearby. The player overrides the AI recommendations, instead telling one squad member to focus on the hostage-taker and the other on a terrorist on a patrol. On the player's go sign, the squad leaps into action. In a few seconds the team, with help from the player, clears the room and rescues the civilian.

STEALTH AND SMOKE
The squad assembles near the front door and quietly slides it open, crouch-walking their way to cover. One squad member is ordered to roll a smoke grenade toward the center of the garage as the other lines up a shot on the hostage taker. When the command is ordered, the AI knows not to take the shot until the smoke has started to discharge, providing cover. As before, the terrorists are systematically taken out and the hostage is saved.

MISDIRECTION
The squad is ordered to break down a door on the left side of the garage. Meanwhile, the player takes position on the far side of the building. The door bursts off its hinges, knocking down the enemy on the other side. The terrorists direct their attention on the disturbance, giving the player enough time to open the other door, take out the hostage-taker, and then engage the remaining confused terrorists.

LAST STAND
In this worst-case scenario, the terrorists have been alerted to Rainbow's presence before the squad gain strategic entry. Unlike in previous Rainbow Six games, the enemy AI kicks into what Ubisoft Montreal calls a last stand mode. Rather than file out of the building to investigate – becoming easy targets in the process – the terrorists take strategic positions in the garage. "Considering how frag grenades are going to be in such a limited quantity, when you have to use two of three grenades to clear the room because they're all in defensive positions, you've expended a lot of resources to compensate for that mistake," Therien says. If the player is an ineffective leader, for instance by failing to help his team by calling out hidden targets he sees using scan mode, this situation can be catastrophic.

These are just some of the many ways breach situations can play out. When you factor in tools such as det cords (explosives used to blast open doors, turning enemies on the other side into porcupines), nonlethal neutralization, explosive ceiling breaches, rappel breaches, and explosive insertions, you can imagine just how many different ways you can approach each encounter.

A TACTICAL APPROACH TO MULTIPLAYER

When Rainbow Six moved to Las Vegas, it gambled away the pre-mission planning that was a staple of the series (we're pretending Lockdown never happened, too). That concession was a welcome change for multiplayer participants who wanted to put their boots onto the ground as soon as possible and create strategies on the fly in the field. For Patriots, Ubisoft Montreal is reincorporating some of those strategic elements with a feature that could prove invaluable to both new players and elite competitors.

The sandtable is an in-game holographic environment in the multiplayer HQ. At its base level, the sandtable allows players to get acquainted with maps. "You can explore the multiplayer environments without having the stress of competing or having other players shooting at you," says lead multiplayer designer Simon Larouche.

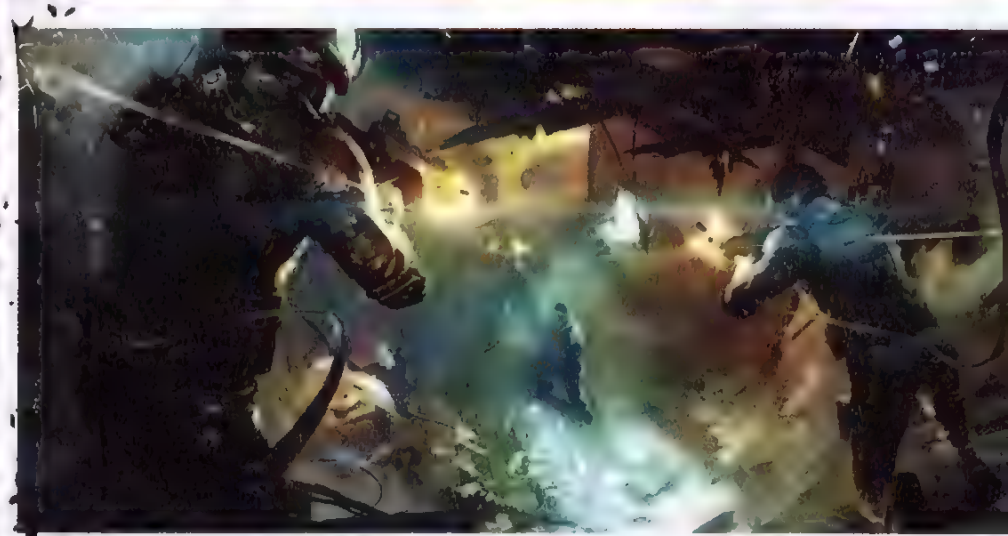
While in this red-tinged virtual world, players can wander around levels alone or with friends. Even though the crimson presentation is different, the layouts are identical to their online counterparts. Points of interest such as doors, ladders, and rappel spots are highlighted in yellow to call attention to their importance. While navigating the interiors, players can drop markers and signs pointing out notable spots. For instance, a favorite sniping position can be flagged with a few taps of the d-pad and a button press or two. If there's a doorway leading to a popular camping zone, the player can create a quick advisory message to recommend chucking a grenade through the door before proceeding.

Once you're in the game, you can share this information with your squadmates or the community at large. Players can rate these tips, which can be strung together in virtual playbooks. Rather than saying "Everyone meet up by that red thing," players who use the sandtable effectively can share their plays and then say "Rally at point A." Hardcore strategists can create three different strategies for every map and game mode, which gives them the flexibility to provide plans for beginners, intermediates, and elites.

"It's really important to give players the opportunity to explore maps before they get shot in the face the first 30 or 40 times," explains creative director David Sears. "This is the story of my life; I used to be a really, really excellent adversarial multiplayer guy, but now I'm pretty old and people like Simon just own me. For me, the sandtable was an opportunity to give me the edge I need to get back into the game. So I go into a non-threatening environment, and I can see where the most dangerous crossfires or ambushes are going to be set up. I can see where the best sniping positions are. Also, I can see paths that I should take highlighted through augmented reality, and only the people on my team using these sandtable plans can see.

"If I need to get from point A to B and there's a very high likelihood that I'm going to be shot while I'm in transit, there's a plan for me. It tells me what I should be doing, how I can get there, exactly where I should put my feet – if I want that level of detail. As I mature as a gamer, then I just know the maps naturally and I don't have to spend time looking at a newbie plan or a beginner plan or an introductory plan. Then I can look at plans that are for more elite play. I think that's what's really cool about the sandtable: It scales from easing entry for first-time squad-based online adversarial shooter players or for people whose skills have atrophied over the decades, but then as I grow and mature as a player, I sort of rejuvenate myself and I start looking at elite plans that give me an edge over people who aren't studying the environments in this type of detail."









The more morally gray or even black your actions, the greater or lesser effect you'll have on some AI teammates. Their opinions of you may only be expressed in purely aesthetic way in terms of their performance and the dialogue, but you will know when you are pushing someone's buttons

"We wanted to give players a simple way to act on what that voice in the back of their head tells them would be the smart thing to do in this particular situation," Sears says.

Old-school Rainbow Six fans who savor the ability to micromanage their squad aren't being forsaken in the quest to appeal to mainstream players. Patriots still has an extended team command menu that gives players serious strategic depth. Here, you can control your team actions right down to the type of grenade you want them to use in a particular breaching scenario (see Into The Breach sidebar on page 62).

As Echo team moves forward down the bridge, Therien issues contextual commands and the squads react intelligently, taking cover and selecting targets automatically. Building this intelligent systemic AI is another major reason Rainbow Six has been dormant for so long. Ubisoft wanted the AI companions to not only take on unique personalities, but be capable of reading the scenarios at hand and acting as a spec ops soldier would in that context. If you arm a squad member with close quarters combat gear, he knows to advance on enemy positions. If you outfit another with a sniper rifle, he will hang back and pick out targets from afar.

The AI enhancements also extend to the enemy soldiers. To make the targets act in a more varied and believable fashion, Ubisoft crafted several AI archetypes, some of which even allow them to make mistakes. You may occasionally see an enemy trip and fall as he heads for a new cover position. On the other side of the combat spectrum, the best enemies you face have the full AI capabilities of your squad mates, making them just as smart as many of the players behind the controllers.

Therien also promises that the shootouts won't devolve into whack-a-mole, with enemies poking their heads out of cover every few seconds.

"We're going to be a game a lot more about positioning," he says. "If a guy goes in cover and returns fire, you're going to have to find a way to get a line of sight on him. He'll relocate if he realizes the cover is compromised."

Enemies also won't stand around mindlessly like AI robots just waiting for their turn to get gunned down. Every enemy has a job or agenda, like loading a truck with explosives or guarding a hostage.

"They're always doing something," Sears says. "They aren't just standing around talking about their CD collections."

As Echo squad moves down the bridge taking fire from walkways above and from behind abandoned cars, it sometimes proves difficult to distinguish between enemies charging their position and civilians running for their life. Properly selecting targets is going to be one of the major challenges during these urban combat sequences, and Sears says the team plans to track your performance and upload your results for the world to see.

"What we're looking at doing is taking regional data to find the bloodthirstiest communities," he says. "We may take aggregate data based on they way people are playing the game and choose to unlock or award different regions with bonuses – content that nobody else will get or you will only get when your region reaches a certain threshold in terms of performance."

After downing a few remaining Patriots, the playtester finally reaches the bomber, who frantically tries to explain the situation. Here Echo leader faces the unenviable task of deciding this man's fate. The team tells him he's running out of time, and Wolfe asks him if he wants to save one life or lose 200. This turns out to be the suburban man's worst birthday ever, as Echo leader makes the tough call and pushes him off the bridge. Screaming as he plummets to his untimely demise, this man thrust into an impossible situation finally takes his finger off the detonator, exploding right before hitting the water.

"I could have stopped it," one squad member says in disgust.

"No, no you couldn't have," Wolfe replies.

Breaching The Envelope

These types of "bad or worse" situations define the story campaign in Rainbow 6 Patriots. Given the sensitive subject matter of Americans turning on each other, we asked the team if they were prepared to face a media controversy propagated by news networks that move so quickly and ignorantly to condemn video games as youth-corrupting trash. We can see the sensational headline now: "Liberal Game Publisher Paints Tea Party as Terrorists."

"We're not concerned about any kind of media backlash because we're not an exploitative game," Sears reassures us.

"This [subject matter] wasn't picked to be controversial on purpose," Rouse continues. "We're trying to set a game that feels current and doesn't feel like it's old terrorism. If you continue to do a game with the same enemies or the same foreigners and you just sort of ignore things that are changing in the world it just starts feeling fake. It feels like 'this is just a video game.'"

"Why can't a game be smarter?" Sears asks in all seriousness. "Why can't a game embrace issues? We're not coming down with any kind of ruling or judgment about any of this. We're letting people talk amongst themselves. We're making a game that we want to provoke discussion and deeper thought. We certainly welcome the opportunity to talk intelligently and thoughtfully about mature subject matter. As the game industry evolves, we're going to face these issues more and more often." ◆

To watch more about Rainbow 6 Patriots, check out our developer interviews at [illegible] windows.


STAR WARS
THE
OLD REPUBLIC
EXPLORING THE EMPIRE



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
December 20

After three years of interminable waiting, we finally had the opportunity to play the beta of BioWare's upcoming Star Wars MMO. Over dozens of combined hours, four Game Informer editors each dove into different character classes populating the Sith Empire faction. We discovered a gigantic game whose scope and ambition are hard to overstate. Combining the traditions of World of Warcraft-style questing and cooperative multiplayer with the storytelling, character depth, and voice acting of other BioWare games like Mass Effect and Dragon Age, The Old Republic is poised to reshape the MMO landscape. Every one of us who played the game found dramatically different experiences to be excited about; flip the pages to the character class you're most excited about, or explore each journal for the full picture.

BOUNTY HUNTER

Ever since I was a kid watching *The Empire Strikes Back*, I've wanted to be Boba Fett. Unfortunately, few worthwhile opportunities have cropped up that allow me to satiate my lust to become a ruthless bounty hunter in the Star Wars universe. That's why I passed up the glitz and glamor of the Sith's ancient weapons and hokey religions when creating a new Empire-affiliated character in The Old Republic. Despite being on and off with World of Warcraft since launch, I don't have as much MMO expertise as my fellow editors here – but that couldn't stop me from strapping on a jet pack and following in the footsteps of Fett.

I decide to shake things up right out of the gate by creating a male Zabrak bounty hunter. After tinkering with a variety of horns, tattoo patterns, and skin tones, I am left with a beefy Darth Maul look-alike named Vladok who is sure to intimidate his marks.

My prologue quest begins by immediately sticking a hook in my mouth with a simple mission: become notorious. This task becomes more complicated when I learn I must gain sponsorship by a Hutt gang lord named Nem'ro so I can enter a bounty hunter contest. Having seen *Return of the Jedi*, I know dealing with Hutts is sticky business involving dubious loyalties and Rancor-baited trapdoors, usually in that order. I'm given my first assignment by a distressed mother – her husband has kidnapped their son in an effort to spare him from the Sith academy. The fully voiced conversations help me become invested in the intriguing task, and while I may have found the woman's plight touching, the credits are why Vladok agrees to help.

To complete my journey I must trek across the gang war-torn city of Jiguuna on Hutta towards the spaceport. My first instinct is to jog past the warring factions like the nonpartisan mercenary I am, but as soon as my mouse cursor indicates hostiles, Vladok's eyes turn as red as his skin. I have my savage attack routine down within minutes. I hit my foes from a distance with a rapid volley of blaster rounds, fire a missile to disperse the crowd, then move in for the close-quarters damage. My favorite bounty hunter ability is easily the rocket punch – a jet pack-propelled shoryuken that sends enemies flying like womp rats at the business end of a T-16's laser cannon. The Old Republic's hotkey-focused combat is simple and satisfying. Each move has a distinct visual effect on enemies, so you don't have to waste time rereading ability descriptions to figure out how one blaster attack varies from another.

One of the things I was most impressed by while hunting down bounties and decimating legions of goons was that I never once ached for a lightsaber. Many might predict the undeniable coolness of the Jedi's path will result in swarms of Skywalker-wannabes flooding The Old Republic at launch. However, the sheer might and diversity of Vladok's abilities staved off any potential midichlorian envy.

I manage to cut off the father and son before their departing flight. The father reveals that he was a Sith cadet in the past, and that the merciless training facility on Korriban nearly killed him for not making the cut. He tells me he won't risk his son dying like he almost did. Cowardice breeds cowardice, and Vladok can smell it. Playing off my sympathies, the husband seems confident I'll take his side. No dice. Through a series of simple dialogue options, I decide then and there that Vladok is a bounty hunter who sticks to his employer's contract no matter the moral cost. As the father's lifeless form collapses next to his son, I feel a tinge of remorse, something I never thought an MMO would be able to deliver. I don't have long to dwell on it though; Vladok and I have credits to collect and a slimy Hutt to deal with.







IMPERIAL AGENT

BY PHIL KOLLAR



Here's the story I'm used to following with my MMO characters: I'm a member of one of two opposing factions in a war-filled world, but I may as well forget about that larger conflict. Tons of people who I've never met require my help thinning out the local wildlife population, collecting minerals, and performing fetch quests. If I'm good enough to stick with it for a few hundred hours and have 10 or 20 friends who do so also, I may get the chance to go on end-game raids that will provide a brief glimpse of a greater story, but for now I had better be satisfied with the grind.

Based on playing through the first 15 levels as an Imperial Agent, I can say that if BioWare has done anything right with Star Wars: The Old Republic, it's that the developer has created a story that is genuinely interesting and makes me feel like my character is an active part of this world.

My character, Agent Rerkek, begins his life on Hutta, the homeworld of the slimy slug-like crime lords made popular by Jabba the Hutt. At the point that I take over, Rerkek is already a well-established agent who is sent to Hutta by Keeper, the head of the Sith Empire's intelligence division.

Agents are not combat powerhouses, and their class storyline reflects this. Rather than focus on killing legions of Republic scum, the agent exists to sow discord in other ways. In this case, I have been sent to Hutta because the Empire requires an alliance with Nem'ro the Hutt, who controls a great number of resources that will be useful in taking on the Republic. Unfortunately, Nem'ro is not ready to take sides in the brewing galactic conflict, so I need to use less straightforward means of swinging him to our side.

I arrive at Nem'ro's palace and introduce myself. Whether talking to a less important side quest giver or in a more elaborate cutscene like this one, dialogue choices are handled via a Mass Effect-style wheel. Old Republic's system doesn't seem to identifiably place dark and light side choices on the same spot of the wheel every time the way Mass Effect does with paragon and renegade options, so I have to carefully look at each potential reply rather than quickly clicking.

BioWare has been quick to brag about Old Republic being the first fully voice-acted MMO. That is an impressive feat, but what's more exciting is that the voice acting is high quality. My character has a smarmy tone that fits in perfectly with what I would imagine an above-it-all Imperial intelligence agent acting like. Nem'ro's servants are appropriately intimidated by my disguise as feared intergalactic mercenary The Red Blade. Even the cold alien language of Nem'ro himself feels nuanced and true to the source material.

After running a few missions with Nem'ro, I find myself facing off against his right-hand man, Karrels Jarvis. Keeper informs me that one of Jarvis' sons has been killed in a quarrel with a Sith lord. Jarvis is sure to turn against the Empire now, so he must be taken care of.

Upon confronting Jarvis, I'm given many dialogue choices: I can immediately kill him without asking questions, try to convince him to run away, or let him know that his second son is still alive, a fact he seems to be unaware of. I choose the second option, hoping to avoid bloodshed, but it doesn't take. Jarvis attacks me, and I kill him.

As with many moments in Old Republic, this could have gone differently. Had I informed Jarvis about his son, it's entirely possible – likely even – that he would have taken my advice and left the planet, only to show up again in my class storyline later down the road. Since I wasn't so lucky, I plant evidence to pin Jarvis' death on the Republic, thus finally ensuring that Nem'ro will make an alliance with my side.

As I head for the Imperial homeworld of Dromund Kaas, Keeper tells me that a Sith lord has taken an interest in my actions. The web of politics and intrigue spun around the agent class was already complex and twisted on Hutta, and it looks like it's only going to get crazier as the Sith get involved. I was skeptical that an MMO could keep me playing for the story, but after 15 levels of Old Republic, I'm a believer.



SITH INQUISITOR

BY MATT MILLER



I began my career as a Sith with some trepidation. I'm well known among my friends as the one who always chooses the "good guy" option in games with morality systems. Adopting the role of an insidious practitioner of dark side sorcery isn't exactly in my wheelhouse. That's why I was thrilled at the flexibility of the new morality system in The Old Republic; no matter what class you play, or whether you work for the Republic or the Empire, the game encourages you to explore the full range of choices as the game progresses.

I start out as a newly recruited Force-user, pulled from the dregs of slavery because of my potential power and value to the Empire. Amid the ancient Sith tombs of Korriban, I spend my first days of play proving myself to a condescending Sith underling, a recruiter for a greater Sith lord in search of an apprentice.

In one mission, I am tasked with solving a mysterious murder at the Academy. In typical Sith fashion, a witness to the crime has been imprisoned and beaten for refusing to reveal what he has seen; the master of the apprentice who committed the murder will surely take vengeance on any witness who speaks up. I'm offered the choice to further torture the poor acolyte for information, or win his trust by assuring his protection from the pitiless murderer and his teacher. Both options deliver a satisfying conclusion, but by choosing the kinder path, my light side meter boosts up several points.

In another scenario, a captured Jedi has been brainwashed with false military secrets that will damage the Republic if acted upon. I'm told to befriend the Jedi to give him a believable escape, so he might in turn report back to his masters. After collecting the lightsaber and gear that the Jedi had hidden before being captured, his path to freedom is assured. However, by revealing it is all a setup, I sabotage the Sith plans to conquer several unsuspecting Republic colony worlds.



Near the end of my training on Korriban, I encounter the first of many interesting wrinkles in the morality system. I acquire my first companion – an ancient reptilian assassin named Khem Val. Once a servant to a mighty Sith lord, Khem Val celebrates the brutal power of the Sith, and he has no patience for any decisions I make that go contrary to that nature. He regularly disagrees with more pacifistic solutions to problems, but remains at my side nonetheless. Every character class has their own set of unique companions, and you'll develop distinct relationships with each through conversation and character-focused quests. One of these companions can always be at your side during battle, and you can directly control their equipment loadout and skill usage during combat. It's like a pet class in other MMOs, but made more complex and interesting through conversation and story development.

On the subject of companion characters, I'd be remiss to not mention The Old Republic's fascinating approach to crafting and professions. The Crew Skills system lets you enjoy the benefits of crafting and gathering without the tedium of completing those tasks yourself. After selecting three of the 14 available skills to train in, I'm able to send companions on missions to further their rank. I choose Archaeology, and send Khem Val to a distant planet to investigate a new dig, in hopes that he might find some lightsaber crystals. Sure enough, after a brief absence of five minutes, my trusty associate arrives back from his journey with some yellow crystals I can use to replace my standard red saber blade.

My time in the beta left me hungry for more. During my 20-plus hours of play, I barely scratched the surface of the light side/dark side morality system and its interactions with my companions. I can't wait to see how my character's decisions will shape the galactic conflict as I ascend the power ladder.



If you're anything like me, you approach MMOs like puzzles to be solved. Maximizing your damage output, questing speed, or crafting efficiency is a goal in and of itself. Good system and combat design gives players a lot of room for creativity in trying to streamline their performance, both in building your character properly and playing it to its highest potential. The Old Republic's first 20 levels aren't a jaw-dropping success in this regard – not that any MMO reveals its full complexity in such a short span – but I am reassured that the game is nothing approaching an abject failure either.

There isn't much to do besides run up and start banging on guys with basic melee strikes to start with. Battles in TOR use the familiar targeting and skill-activation mechanics common to most MMORPGs. The difference between this and similarly designed games is that TOR's combat is more fluid and mobile. Even while soloing, I rarely fight single monsters; most encounters are between me, my companion, and two to four enemies. Once I have a few levels and abilities under my belt, I often find myself bouncing between targets (sometimes literally, by giving gravity the finger with my awe-inspiring Force Charge ability), and even the most basic fights are explosive brawls filled with Force-powered heroics, devastating sniper blasts, missile barrages, and powerful grenades.

This variety in encounter shapes makes me regularly switch up tactics to perform at peak output. Unlike World of Warcraft, for instance, the optimal skill sequence varies quite a bit from fight to fight. A hulking jungle beast asks for a straightforward assault. A squad of Republic soldiers with medic support is probably easier to take out one at a time with focused strikes, letting my inherent toughness shrug off their weak blows while I grind the medic's health down first. A deranged Sith apprentice and his possessed trooper minions might be best handled by vaulting in, smashing the apprentice in the face, then calling on the Force to send out incapacitating shockwaves with a dramatic ground pound

All of this is largely academic with solo



content. TOR is tuned to be about as easy as modern WoW, so I'm pretty sure I could take off all my armor, use only the most basic attack over and over, and still defeat just about everything. The addition of companions makes it that much easier; my Twi'lek smuggler lady does more damage than my tank-specced Sith himself. Thankfully, I've seen companions behave close to ideally on their own with no direct control, so it's not like you're stuck babysitting them all the time.

Group content is harder, as is typical for the genre. The group instances I tackled require players to mostly pay attention to what's going on, though they're not at all difficult if you have anything but complete newbies on your team. I dig spawning harder optional bosses by completing bonus objectives, and the self-contained stories are as well-written as the rest of the game. Group conversations are handled smartly: everyone chooses a response, and the winner of a 1-100 roll issues theirs and sets off any consequences branching from it – but everyone gets light side/dark side credit for what they individually choose.

Companions are automatically dismissed if they'd bring the number of players above four, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that completing these early group missions with two or three players and a couple companions was very doable. You still want a healer and a tank, and you're better off with players filling those roles and companions taking damage slots, but I did beat a level-appropriate instance with a companion healing.

Tanking is very much in line with other MMORPGs. It's easier to get a visual read on who the various enemies are targeting without using nameplates or other UI tricks, which is great, but on the whole the experience of going into defensive stance (excuse me, "Soresu Form") and using AoE ground pounds and Force screams to hold heal aggro while beating on the primary target and taunting any loose mobs is beyond familiar.

My whole journey from character creation to level 20 was familiar yet new, mostly in good ways. TOR's mechanics are comfortable, but BioWare has successfully brought intriguing stories to an MMORPG. The Sith lord I serve, Darth Baras, is a fascinating character. I can't wait to see where he sends me now that I have my own starship.



Checking Vita's

With Sony's PlayStation Vita arriving in early 2012, we





Vitals

take a close look at what you can expect at launch



While you're busy plowing through this holiday season's latest and greatest console titles, a new handheld is right around the corner. The Vita is due for North American launch on February 22, and with it comes the key to a world of portable gaming like we've never seen before. This powerful little piece of tech narrows the gap between portable and console gameplay, delivering stellar visuals and the dual analog stick control gamers have enjoyed for over a decade. These features would be enough to entice many gamers, but Sony makes the whole package more attractive with front and rear touch capabilities, Sixaxis motion control, myriad social functions, and meaningful PS3 connectivity. In a market traditionally dominated by iterative Nintendo handhelds and slowly being usurped by mobile games, the PlayStation Vita makes a convincing case that the handheld bar is still being raised in exciting ways.

The PSP was a capable piece of hardware, but the handheld suffered a drought of worthwhile games. Sony is fixing that by releasing a slew of promising titles within the Vita's launch window. A lengthy list of lesser-known games is confirmed only for Japan, but these are the titles we had a chance to play. by Tim Turi



The Games

Uncharted: Golden Abyss



If a single title represents the raw power of the Vita, it's Nathan Drake's upcoming excursion. Set before Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Golden Abyss follows Drake and his mysterious new partner Marissa Chase as they seek out an ancient amulet. The game not only does a brilliant job showcasing the handheld's staggering graphical prowess, but also integrates motion and touch-based controls in intriguing ways.

Expanding Drake's legacy of bad luck, the demo begins with the treasure seeker awakening in a burning building. He seems confused about how he ended up there, but first things first: he needs to get out of the inferno alive. Wooden beams blaze and crackle as convincing fire effects consume the structure. Nate stumbles through the environment searching for a safe ledge to begin his ascent. Sony Bend had access to Naughty Dog's library of animations for Golden Abyss, so Drake moves just like you'd expect him to as he climbs and leaps along the conveniently placed beams.

Traversing the environment using the face buttons and dual analog sticks feels just as tight as it does in previous games. Things diverge from the norm as you discover Nate can be guided between ledges by tracing his path on the Vita's touchscreen. Using a finger to guide him up worked reliably, but I quickly went back to the traditional controls.

Once out of the frying pan, Drake is quickly thrust into gunfire. He and the enigmatic new femme fatale, Chase, make their way through South American streets while taking cover from trigger-happy gunmen. The pop-out-and-shoot gunplay of past games is in full swing here, aided discreetly by the Vita's gyroscopic motion controls. Once you take aim in the general direction of an enemy soldier, you can use the gyro controls to fine tune Drake's aim towards the thug's head. It's a unique control method that I didn't realize was in effect until Sony clued me in later.

When not silencing armed goons with his trusty pistol, Drake spends his time climbing around buildings with Chase. When confronted with a lofty ledge, our hero will help Chase up with a boost, triggered by an upward swipe on the touchscreen. These two exchange the witty, subtly flirtatious dialogue we've come to expect between Nate and the opposite sex.

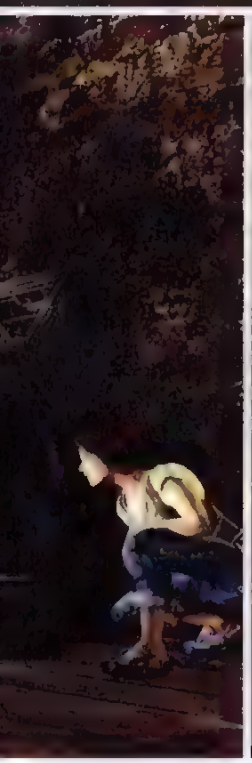
While specifics on Chase's motives aren't clear yet, she is obviously valuable to Drake. Later in the game Nate is perched on a ledge littered with sniper rifles as Chase takes cover from machine gun fire. Enemies converge on her position from all sides, and it's up to Drake to pick off the threats. The ranged weapon offers players a chance to fully use the gyroscope to lead the crosshairs over enemies' faces While it may be impractical to twist around in your seat to take aim on enemies, using the gyro to tweak your general aim is surprisingly satisfying.

Chase finally climbs to safety up to Nate's perch when a heavily fortified truck of guards pulls onto a bridge directly across the way. The duo desperately picks off the growing numbers as a heavy turret lays down relentless fire. By a stroke of luck a strong wind blows up one of the trucks' tarps, revealing barrels of explosives beneath. With one final bullet, the bridge and all bad guys on it erupt in a glorious flash of light. While we haven't seen anything that perfectly matches the bombastic scale of Uncharted 2, this flashy bridge explosion signals that catastrophic events can still be expected.

Unfortunately this is where my time with Uncharted: Golden Abyss comes to a close. As a fan of the series and someone who's optimistic about the PlayStation Vita, I went into my first hands-on session with high expectations. My preconceptions about the game quickly melted away as I once again became absorbed in the world of Uncharted. If not for the occasional required touchscreen segments, I may have forgotten I was playing on a handheld the entire time.

The true beauty of this black and white misadventure is in its simplicity. Players guide Lil and Lazro through one perilous room after another with help from the front and back panels. The objective generally involves guiding one of the captives past electrified panels or collapsing panels with careful timing and tinkering with the environment. At one point Lil gulps down a bunch of soda and becomes an effervescent jitterbug. Pretending to pinch the over-caffeinated character by simultaneously squeezing the front and rear touch panels causes the hopped-up hero to rocket quickly over pits. Another situation involves using the Vita's gyroaxle motion control to steer an inflated Lil through the air while avoiding assorted hazards. Escape Plan is one of the best early games for all the Vita's touch- and motion-based bells and whistles, and promises to be a standout experience on the handheld.







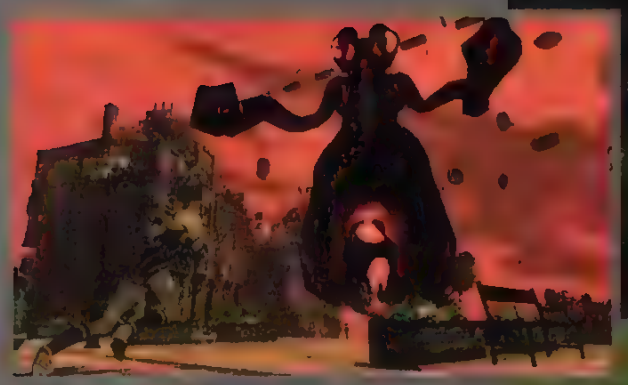
Gunning down enemies while aiming down the rifle's scope is fun and responsive

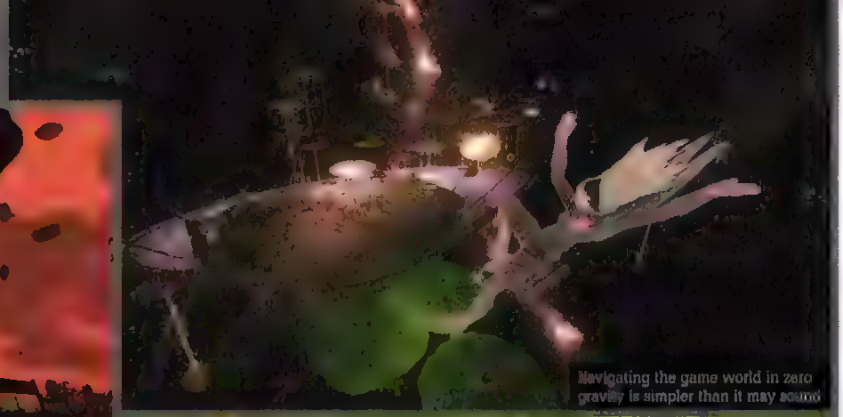


Two Choices

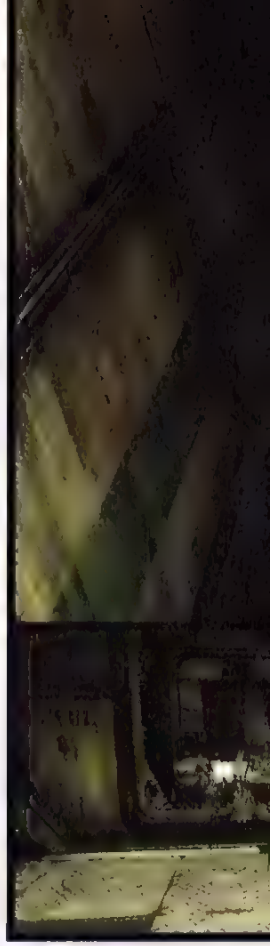
Consumers can choose between two versions of the Vita depending on their connectivity needs. The 3G-enabled model is supported with a subscription through AT&T. Sony is emphasizing that the Vita is about keeping gamers connected through social media and online gaming, so those gamers who like to stay in the loop may want to consider this $399 version. The Japanese 3G Vita will have a download limit of 20MB per file, but we're still waiting on official word about the U.S. model's data limitations.

The wi-fi-only version of the Vita lacks the constant connectivity of the 3G model, but players can still play online and download games via wireless networks. The sacrifice of a constant network also comes with a handsome discount, with the unit being priced at $249.





Navigating the game world in zero gravity is simpler than it may sound



Gravity Rush is a topsy-turvy action title that caught me by surprise. Our heroine Kat bends the power of gravity to her command. Her goal is to discover how she ended up in the bizarre-yet-beautiful cel-shaded land, and the only lead she has is a shadowy girl with similar abilities. Kat can deliver flurries of kicks to her enemies while on the ground, but a click of a shoulder button frees her from gravity. Players can use either the Vita's gyroscope or [illegible] her to walk up the sides of buildings or deliver [illegible] says Gravity Rush will be a full-fledged adventure through a surreal land.



Little Deviants

This manic collection of minigames is the perfect way to acclimate gamers to the Vita's numerous hardware features. In one AR game similar to the 3DS' Face Raiders, players gun down alien ships using the camera and Sixaxis controls. Another tasks you with tilting the Vita every which way to guide a ghost's descent down a twisting mineshaft. A whack-a-mole-style game has players tapping the front and back touch panels to hit creatures as they pop out of a 3x3 grid. This reflex-heavy game is the perfect way to get used to accurately tapping the rear touch pad. You can then test your rear touch pad skills by using your finger to create hills in the terrain to guide a ball towards various goals in another game. Little Deviants is not only a blast, but it could also serve as a crucial tool for anyone who needs some practice with the Vita.







ModNation Racers: Roadtrip

This portable version of Sony's premier kart racer is a follow up to the user-created content-focused PS3 entry. Sony allows crafty gamers to use the Vita's touchscreen to trace their racetrack and press the backtouch panel to raise mountains. It's possible to build a functioning track within minutes, and the process is also a lot of fun. Naturally, racing plays as big a part in ModNation as the course creation. Drifting around turns and lining up rockets is a breeze with the Vita's analog sticks. Not only does the game come packed with 30 brand new courses, but you can access over 500,000 user-created tracks made for the PS3 version.





Resistance: Burning Skies

I got a chance to learn more about the weapon upgrade system in this Vita title, which bridges the gap between Resistance 1 and 2 during the Chimeran invasion of the East Coast. Firefighter Tom Riley collects Gray Matter throughout his quest, a substance that is neither human nor Chimeran in origin. Tom can harness this potent technology to upgrade both conventional and Chimeran guns, leaving it up to the player to decide whether to spread the benefits equally among all weapons or focus on a few specific favorites. For example, you could improve a gun's fire rate or augment it with explosive rounds. I loved the automatic upgrades of Resistance 3, but the concept of customizing the new Chimera chain-gun, cluster fire gun, or any of the classic weapons has me excited. Combine this promising progression with the rock solid shooting action and we could have the best portable FPS to date.







Hot Shots Golf World Invitational

The Hot Shots series sticks to PlayStation consoles like a stray ball to a sand trap, so it's no surprise that the latest entry will be arriving alongside the Vita. The series' staple power meter and swing-timing return in full here, so veterans will immediately feel comfortable at the controls. Diligent links lovers will enjoy using the Vita's front touchscreen to adjust ball trajectory and judge slope gradients with the rear touch panel. Along with scheduled tournaments, Sony also has plans to incorporate an asynchronous, Words With Friends-esque match type for busy golfers on the go.

The Specs

- 5 inch, 16:9 multi-touch OLED screen
- Dual analog sticks
- Front and rear VGA cameras
- Multi-touch capable rear touchpad
- Six-axis motion control
- Built-in GPS/Wi-Fi location support
- Bluetooth-enabled
- 3 to 5 hours of battery life while playing games

Interface

Users navigate menus primarily with the front touchscreen. Big, colorful icons populate multiple scrollable screens. Selecting a game opens up a LiveArea page with information about new DLC, tournaments, and other hot info. Closing an application is performed by pulling a virtual tab as if tearing away a piece of paper from a notebook.

PS3 Connectivity

Fans of the PSP's interconnectivity with the PS3 will be happy to know that traditional remote play is available with the Vita. Users can access personal photos, music, and videos from their PS3 on the go. Movies and streaming applications protected by DRM are less likely to be viewable with remote play due to legal implications. Sony boss Shu Yoshida has demonstrated the ability to play Killzone 3 remotely on the Vita, much like the Nintendo Wii U's ability to play games while the TV is used for something else. While this feature is exciting, whether it's widely available to Vita owners is up to developers. We also know that some games like the HD remakes of Final Fantasy X, the Metal Gear Solid HD collection, and some downloadable titles will be playable on both the PS3 and Vita, complete with transferred save data.

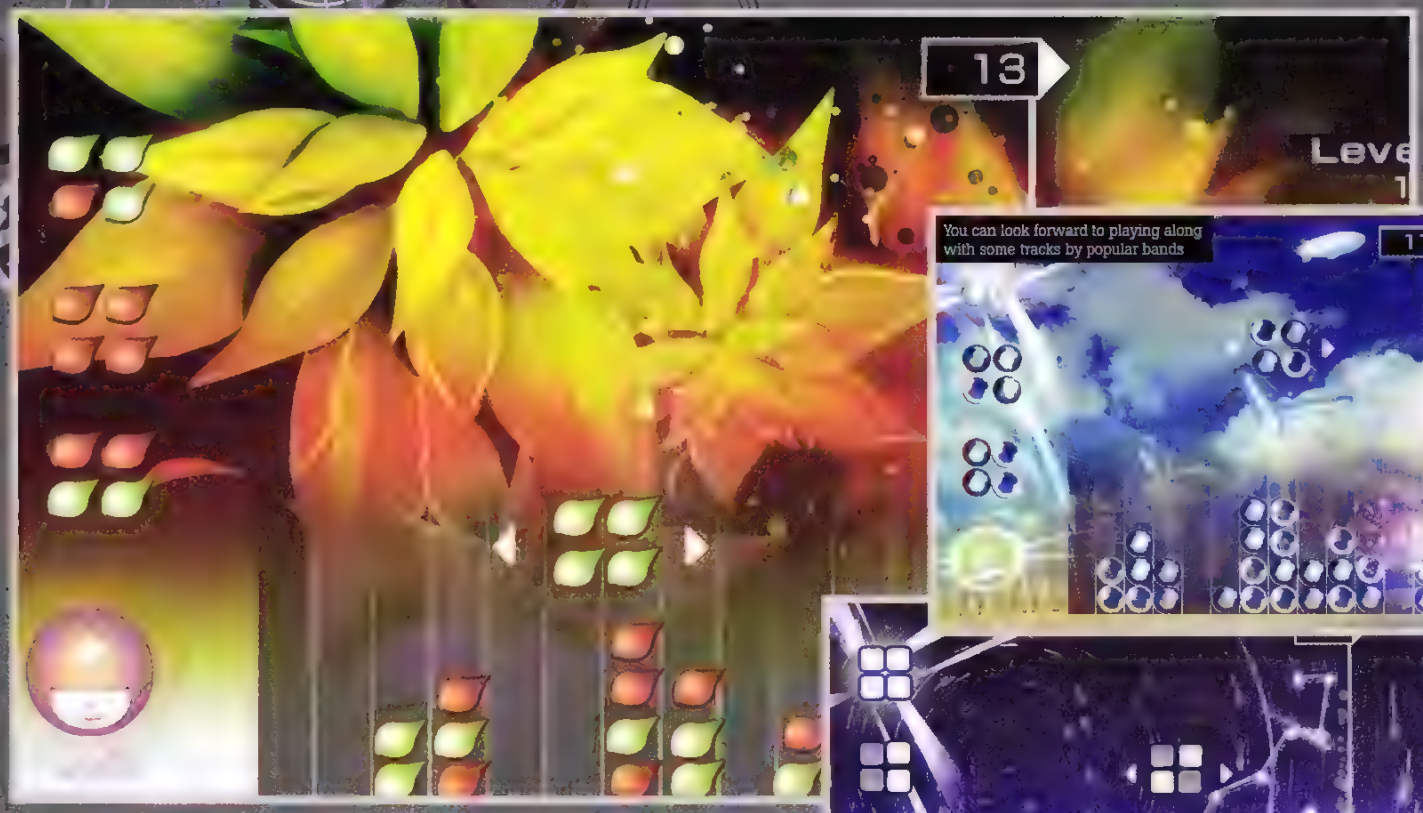
Backward Compatibility

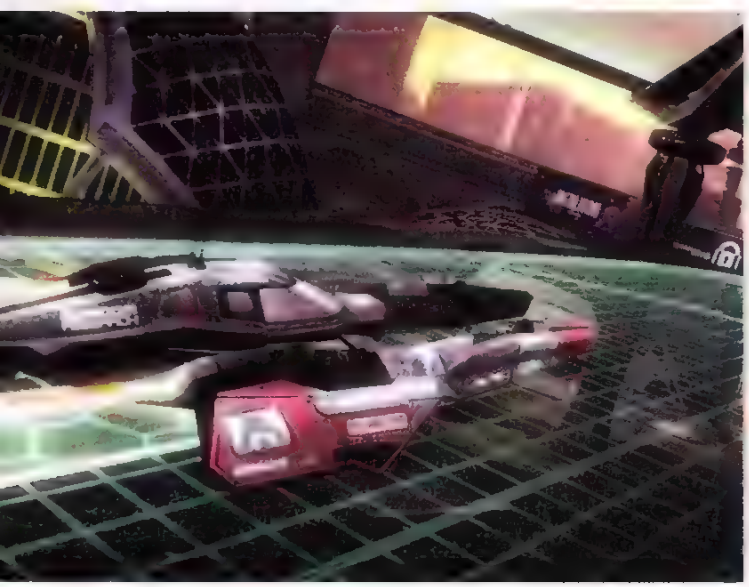
Sony says that all digital PSP games will be playable on the Vita, complete with improved resolution and dual analog stick support where applicable. There's no official word whether a plan is in place for owners of physical UMDs to be able to play digital versions of their favorite titles on the Vita. Sony has confirmed that the Vita is capable of PlayStation 2 emulation, but the company isn't ready to talk about specifics. We're hoping for the PS2 equivalent of the PSN's PSone classics.

PlayStation Suite

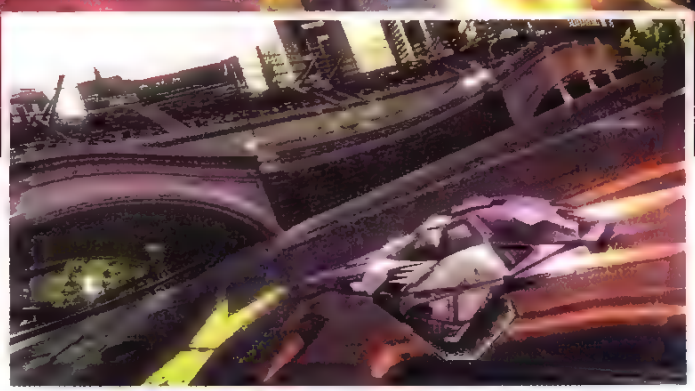
Plenty of great core games are on the way to the Vita, but Sony has its arms open to anyone interested in developing more casual mobile software. The PlayStation Suite allows developers of these smaller scale games a channel to get their creations in the hands of Vita users.





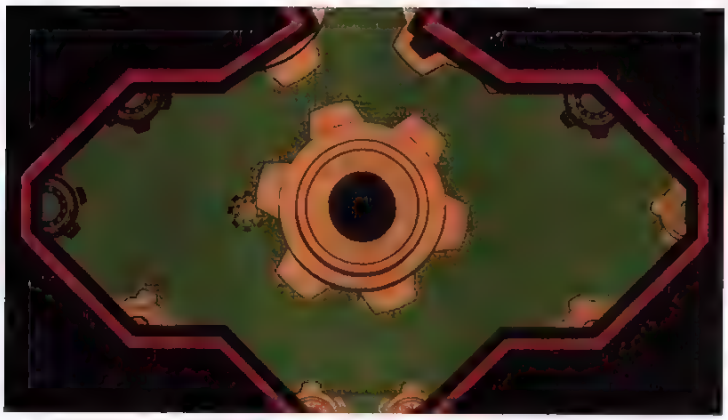






Wipeout 2048

Before you ask yourself why Sony decided the Wipeout series needed a prequel, you should know the strange move has addressed two recurring complaints of the series: narrow tracks and touchy driving. With actual ground vehicles speeding across wider roads instead of hover sleds, Wipeout becomes markedly more playable on the Vita. Steering with an analog stick feels natural and reliable, and even the Sixaxis motion controls become a fun diversion with some practice. Even better, Wipeout 2048 can be played cross-platform with the PS3's Wipeout HD Fury.



Sound Shapes

Simplistic design and hypnotic musical platforming are the source of this title's charm. The straightforward level design is key, as it prevents crafting your own toe-tapping levels from becoming too overwhelming. You don't need to be a maestro to come up with an interesting little ditty for the Sound Shapes community to enjoy hopping along to, you just need to be able to tap the touchscreen where you want the collectible notes to go. It may not seem like much by looking at it, but don't be surprised when time escapes you while playing and you're left with a catchy song in your head.

d-pads for executing hadoukens and killer combos, and the Vita is no different. This portable version of the game looks and feels almost exactly like its console counterparts, so

road. New combatants like S.T.A.R.S.-killer Nemesis joins the fray with an ultimate attack in which he mutates into his final fleshy form, absorbs his opponent with disgusting ten-

Frank West, Hawkeye, and Dr. Strange also enter the fight.





Touch My Katamari

No Katamari title would be complete without dual analog sticks to roll around the Prince's sticky ball. If you're into experimentation you can even guide the Katamari with the front touchscreen. The real innovation in Touch My Katamari comes with the rear touch panel, which you can drag your fingers along to stretch out the ball horizontally or vertically. Flattening out the all-consuming sphere allows you to roll under tables, up ledges, or even behind bookshelves to collect every last knickknack. The series' quirky King of All Cosmos, amazing soundtrack, and colorful visuals return in full force on the Vita.

Apps

Not to be outshined by the mobile market, the Vita will also support applications tailored specifically for the Vita. Sony wants to provide a selection of well-known, useful apps to consumers specifically tuned to gaming and the portability of the Vita. The Vita comes with preinstalled apps such as Near and Party along with the following:

- **Welcome Park**
  Minigames that familiarize new users with the Vita's features
- **PlayStation Store**
  Download new games, trailers, and DLC
- **Group Messaging**
  Chat with your PSN friends whether they use the Vita, PS3, or PSP
- **Trophies**
  Check out your virtual achievements
- **Music**
  An MP3 player used to listen to your favorite tunes
- **Photos**
  Take and save pictures captured with the Vita's cameras
- **Internet Browser**
  Use the Vita's touchscreen to browse your favorite sites
- **Friends**
  Check out who's online and see what they've been playing

Near

This program is at the core of the Vita's social networking emphasis. Near displays fellow Vita owners in your vicinity and what they're playing, and allows you to compare your trophies. It's a hub that social-minded gamers can use to interact with others in ways that remind us of a more fleshed out version of the 3DS' StreetPass/Mii Plaza feature. Vita users can leave virtual gifts for other gamers in the real world, so when they pass the same location they can discover a new weapon or item for a game. You can even set up a virtual treasure hunt and send a friend off to search for digital artifacts scattered across the city.

Party

If you like chatting with your friends even when you're not playing the same game together, you can look forward to the Vita's Party feature. Party allows cross-game chat, supports Skype, and lets you continue conversations regardless of what you're doing with your Vita.

At A Glance



Army Corps of Hell



Ridge Racer



Shinobido 2: The Revenge of Zen





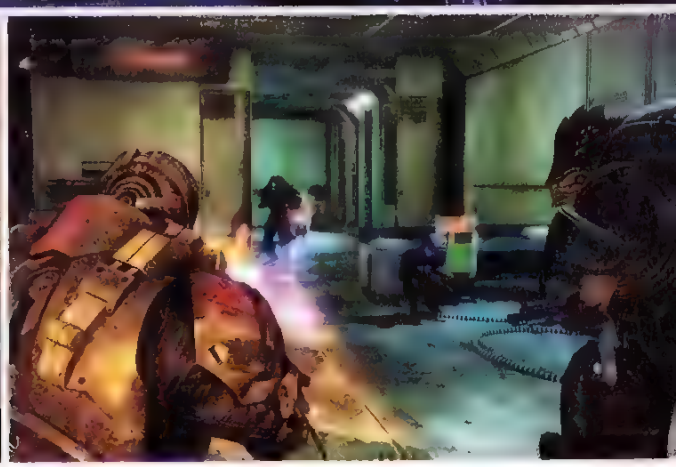
Your characters in multiplayer will become assets for Shepard to use in the single-player campaign

Command Me, Shepard

All of the time you spend building up your multiplayer characters has an impact on your single-player campaign. BioWare isn't explaining exactly how the connection works, except that your multiplayer characters can become war assets at Shepard's disposal, ready to be deployed across the galaxy. However, the developer is quelling one concern immediately: You won't need to play any multiplayer in order to see the best ending in Mass Effect 3.



All six of the main classes are available in co-op, complete with full skill progression





Racial Equality

I only played as human characters in my time with Mass Effect 3's multiplayer but BioWare says players can select from six of the series' major races. In addition to humans, you can create asari, turian, drell, salarian or krogan characters. While the team isn't revealing specifics yet, each of the races has a unique edge that sets them apart from the others. I bet I can guess one of them. After all, a krogan who can't charge recklessly into battle is hardly a krogan at all.

Mass Effect 3

Saving the galaxy isn't a one-person job

Mass Effect's single-player campaign tells the story of Commander Shepard's attempt to stop an invading army of evil, sentient spaceships. While Shepard and the crew aboard the Normandy fight the major battles, they aren't the only ones contributing to the war effort. BioWare sends this message loud and clear in Mass Effect 3 by adding a cooperative multiplayer component to let players see the fight against the Reapers from new perspectives. I played the new mode for a solid hour at a recent EA event, and as a hardcore fan of the series, I loved every minute.

The multiplayer does not feature dozens of store-brand Shepards gunning each other in competitive matches. Instead, it is a clever co-op survival mode supporting up to four players, where you mow down waves of enemies that get harder as your progress. It isn't just a Horde mode knock-off, though; the robust progression system gives you more to work for than a few character skins and bragging rights. You can play as any of the six classes from the main game – soldier, adept, engineer, vanguard, infiltrator, or sentinel – and each one has the same skill tree from the single-player campaign.

As you gain experience and levels, you also earn skill points to invest in your talents. For instance, an adept can choose to improve abilities like singularity, warp, and pull, or put that skill point toward better power recharge times or higher health. Any upgrades you apply are persistent on that character, so you get more powerful from one match to the next. This gives you the sense that you're building a mighty warrior from the ground up.

The degree of choice and variety ensures that even if you and a friend are playing the same class, you probably won't have the exact same set of abilities. However, I wouldn't recommend too much overlap. The missions encourage teamwork, with some characters using powers to incapacitate the advancing Cerberus operatives while the combat-heavy classes mop up. The roles aren't too rigidly defined, though. As an adept, I earned the top spot in a couple matches, so combat doesn't only favor the soldier class.

Each mission has a finite number of waves, and if you beat them all, you get a nice experience bonus. The ability to revive your fallen comrades (within a short time frame) improves your odds of seeing the mission through, but if you fail, you still get to keep what you earned, ensuring that you're better prepared for the next battle. The waves aren't all just about killing the bad guys, either. Some have more of a mini-boss feel, like when an Atlas mech stomps onto the field with some support soldiers. Others involve timed objectives, like on the Noveria map. In one of the waves there, we activated several beacons as a timer counted down, fending off Cerberus troops along the way. The situation was similar in the Slums map, where four devices needed to be activated in the middle of an enemy assault.

Some gamers may balk at the idea of multiplayer in Mass Effect, since the series has built its reputation by providing a great single-player experience. Even with its survival-based structure, I was surprised at how well this co-op mode captures Mass Effect's distinct breed of combat. The shooting mechanics are fun and accessible, the biotic powers cause all kinds of chaos, and the heavy melee attack is super satisfying. With the RPG framework tying the whole thing together, I can see myself sinking many hours into Mass Effect 3's co-op. It doesn't feel cobbled together or shoehorned in – it feels like a great step forward for one of my favorite franchises. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
March 6



E
and you get an XP bonus if you survive them all



Final Fantasy XIII-2

The quest to find Valhalla begins

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
January 31

Most RPGs are difficult to judge based on the first few hours of gameplay. Tutorials are absorbed, characters are introduced, and the overall pace of the adventure's early stages is usually quite slow. Most gamers who will be picking up Final Fantasy XIII-2 will have already played FF XIII, so jumping into the new chapter will be a smooth transition. But even for newcomers to the Fabula Nova Crystalis universe, I'd argue that FF XIII-2's introductory hours are shaping up to be the most thrilling of any recent Final Fantasy title – even if the story is a tad confusing.

Final Fantasy XIII-2 begins with Lightning talking to the goddess Etro. The heroine speaks of a sadness that grips Valhalla, the world she's trapped within. It's revealed that after the end of FF XIII, Lightning went to join Fang and Vanille in the gigantic crystal column suspending Cocoon above Pulse. This, apparently, is her gateway to Valhalla.

The action picks up after a mysterious purple figure forlornly lays a lifeless body to rest in the dark waters of Valhalla's ocean shore. Lightning's previously anonymous rival, Caius, summons a swath of enraged monsters from thin air. The creatures clash with an army of minions summoned by Lightning, who stands atop a balcony overseeing the battle. The stoic, armored heroine points her sword in the direction of the battle as her and Caius exchange threats.

Eventually the opposing factions' leaders meet each other face-to-face on the beach and cross swords. The dual escalates as Lightning mounts her mechanical steed, Odin, and Caius transforms into the terrible Bahamut through some sort of witchery. The two battle along the beach in the first gameplay segment. After casting enough lightning strikes and magic spells, Lightning depletes Bahamut's HP bar. She gives chase up the side of a ruined building. The battle shifts into a series of gripping quick-time events. Flicks of the analog sticks and button presses cause Lightning to dodge the beast's mega flare and other devastating attacks, while other prompts allow her to select a melee or magic attack. The furious fight concludes with Lightning burying Caius, in his human form, under a pile of rubble.

Suddenly Lightning notices a familiar figure falling from the heavens. Noel, the new male hero shown searching for Lightning in previous coverage, plummets towards the sand below. Lightning recognizes him from a vision. We learn that Noel comes from an apocalyptic future 700 years from now, and that he is the only one who can save humanity. Lightning gives Noel a gift to give to her sister Serah, and sends him through a huge wormhole alongside a massive meteorite.

The story shifts to Serah, who is sound asleep in her beachside home on New Bodhum. A time



Snow and Hope Return

FF XIII-2 allows players to experience branching story lines thanks to the distortion Crux. During my time with the game I ran into an older version of Hope, but I also learned that if I had done things differently I could have encountered an aged, haggard Snow instead



ripple emerges while she rests, potentially a side effect from Noel's journey back to her time. She awakens to find her clothing has miraculously changed. Before she has much time to think, the shouts of NORA soldiers – the freedom fighters from the first game – alert Serah to an incoming monster attack. Noel suddenly appears, introduces himself to Serah as her guardian, and presents her with Lightning's gift: a purple crossbow. The two are thrust into battle. Serah quickly develops a knack for holding her own in battle. After the last creature is slain, Lightning's gift surprises Serah by transforming into a Moogle named Mog. Serah recognizes the pom-pommed critter from her dreams, and the two become fast friends.

Noel believes the meteorite may be of some use, so the trio travels along New Bodhum's beautiful tropical beach towards the impact zone. At one point a gigantic glowing monstrosity tears through space-time, and the party must beat it back. Rectifying paradoxical anomalies like this mini-boss wins the player an artefact [sic] that is used to travel through time. Being launched into these unexpected, large-scale battles keeps things interesting – enemies can come from any point in time, which means you never know what to expect.

They discover a large yellow bird just as they find the meteorite. Riding the chocobo makes backtracking through New Bodhum to chat with other NPCs and clean up any side missions a breeze. Continuing on towards the meteorite, Noel taps into his unique power to harness the artefact and morph the humongous rock into a time gate. These time gates allow the team access to the Historia Crux, a hub players use to travel between the many locations of FF XIII-2 [see sidebar].

Serah's companions and members of NORA are understandably skeptical of Noel's ability to travel through time. It turns out claiming you're from the future doesn't score you a lot of trusted friends right away. After much convincing, the protective members of NORA allow Noel to escort Serah on a quest to find her sister.

After the party tackles a mechanized behemoth in the Bresha Ruins, as detailed in issue 219 of *Game Informer*, they find themselves near Yaschas Massif. This ruined Gran Pulse city is the heart of the time distortion rocking the world of FF XIII-2. Serah and Noel must travel through the city via a dark mountain valley while sticking to moving spotlights. Wandering too far from the illuminated sanctuary attracts monsters to their location. Emerging from the shadowy mountain pass intact, Serah encounters a familiar face: Hope [see sidebar]. The whiny pest from FF XIII is now several years older and far less awful. Hope is leading a team of researchers trying to uncover the history of Yaschas Massif. A clairvoyant named Yeul has allegedly envisioned the fall of the city. Noel uses one of Hope's research tools, called the Oracle Drive, to experience a vision of his own. He sees Lightning and Valhalla, and learns the truth about the enigmatic world. From Valhalla, Lightning can see all of history. Unfortunately, that's where my time with Final Fantasy XIII-2 ends.

If you're confused by Final Fantasy XIII-2's story, you're not alone. I read every datalog and followed each cutscene in Final Fantasy XIII and paid attention to every twist and turn during my lengthy time with this sequel. Though the inclusion of time travel and alternate timelines makes for a perplexing plot, it didn't detract from the fun I had progressing along my characters' Crystarium paths, experimenting with new monster allies [see sidebar], and exploring the vast and beautiful worlds. This sequel delivers satisfying battles and memorable moments early on, and these first acts are already superior to FF XIII's plodding introduction. • **Tim Turi**

Gotta Catch 'Em All!

As mentioned in previous FF XIII-2 coverage, Noel and Serah round out their party by enlisting the help of monster partners. During my playthrough I used a Cait Sith to satisfy my medic role, a metallic Hoplite as an extra heavy hitter, and a wasp-like Nekton as a spare spellcaster. Cycling between these allies opened up new paradigm options, allowing me to shift between more battle formations to dispose of foes how I see fit. Each captured monster can also be expanded via their own Crystarium path.

Crystarium

The Crystarium System in FF XIII-2 works similarly to the previous game. Players unlock new skills on a linear path by spending points earned in battle. Instead of having a different Crystarium path for each class, characters advance along one lengthy line of nodes. Each node requires a class focus, and players can customize their characters' core statistics and skills by selecting which class to drop into each.

Historia Crux

The Historia Crux is more than a gateway between sections in Final Fantasy XIII-2. Responding to fans' criticism that FF XIII was too linear, Square-Enix is allowing players to replay cleared locations in FF XIII-2. This opens up the doors for diverting paths and unique playthroughs where two players won't necessarily experience the same events or interact with the same characters.


Final Fantasy heroines ever.



Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

Sly's ninja ancestor joins the gang as a playable character

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1–Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

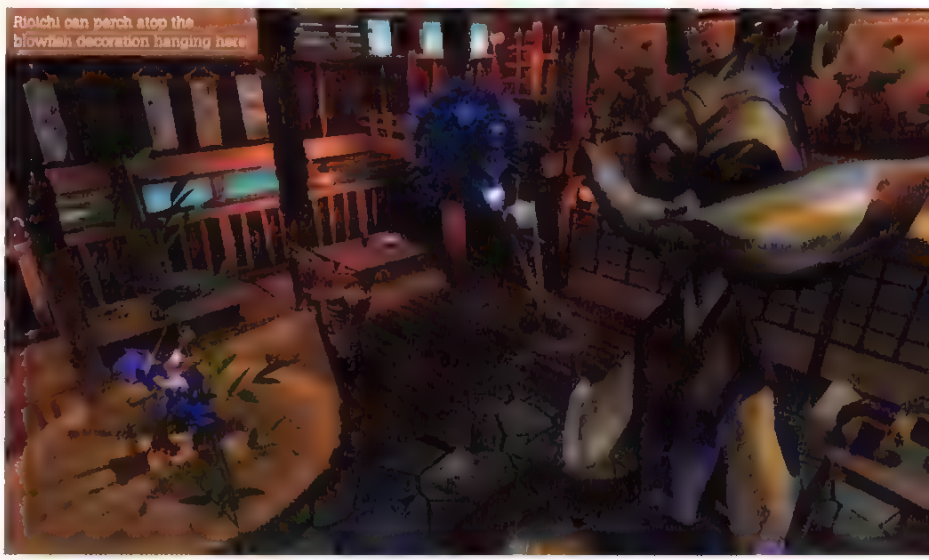
» **Developer**
Sanzaru Games

» **Release**
2012

We recently had a chance to infiltrate Sanzaru Games' studio in Foster City, California to steal a glimpse at the fourth entry in the Sly Cooper series. Sanzaru is responsible for last year's gorgeous high definition collection of the original PS2 trilogy, and this new title is staying true to original developer Sucker Punch's vision for the stealth platformer while sneaking in some intriguing new gameplay elements. One significant addition to the series is the ability to travel through time to meet and even play as Sly's thieving ancestors.

So far Sanzaru has shown Sly creeping through feudal Japan, stealing pieces of flame-resistant samurai armor and battling the evil tiger dictator El Jefe atop a gigantic statue of himself. While these exciting sections show off the game's new disguise mechanic and dynamic boss battles, they've lacked context for why Sly is snooping through ancient Japan. Sanzaru revealed for the first time that Sly has traveled back in time to save his Japanese ancestor, master ninja Rioichi Cooper, from an interloper interfering with the world's timeline.

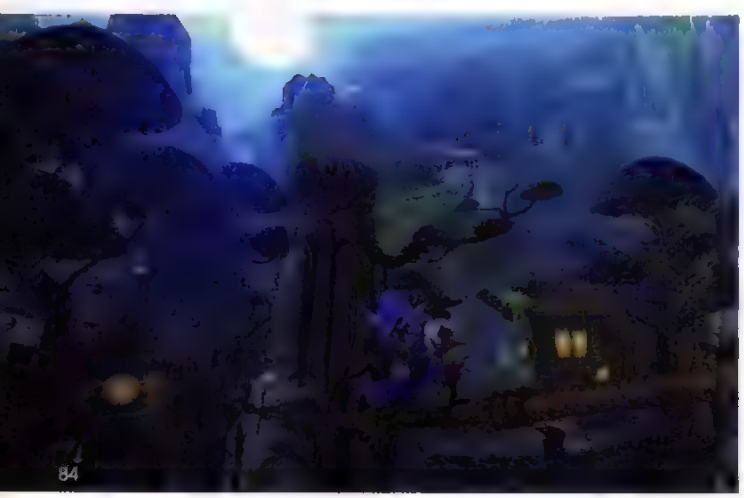
While specific story details on who is tinkering with the past is yet unclear (it's not El Jefe), we know that Rioichi is in deep trouble, and only Sly and the gang can save him. Sly originally

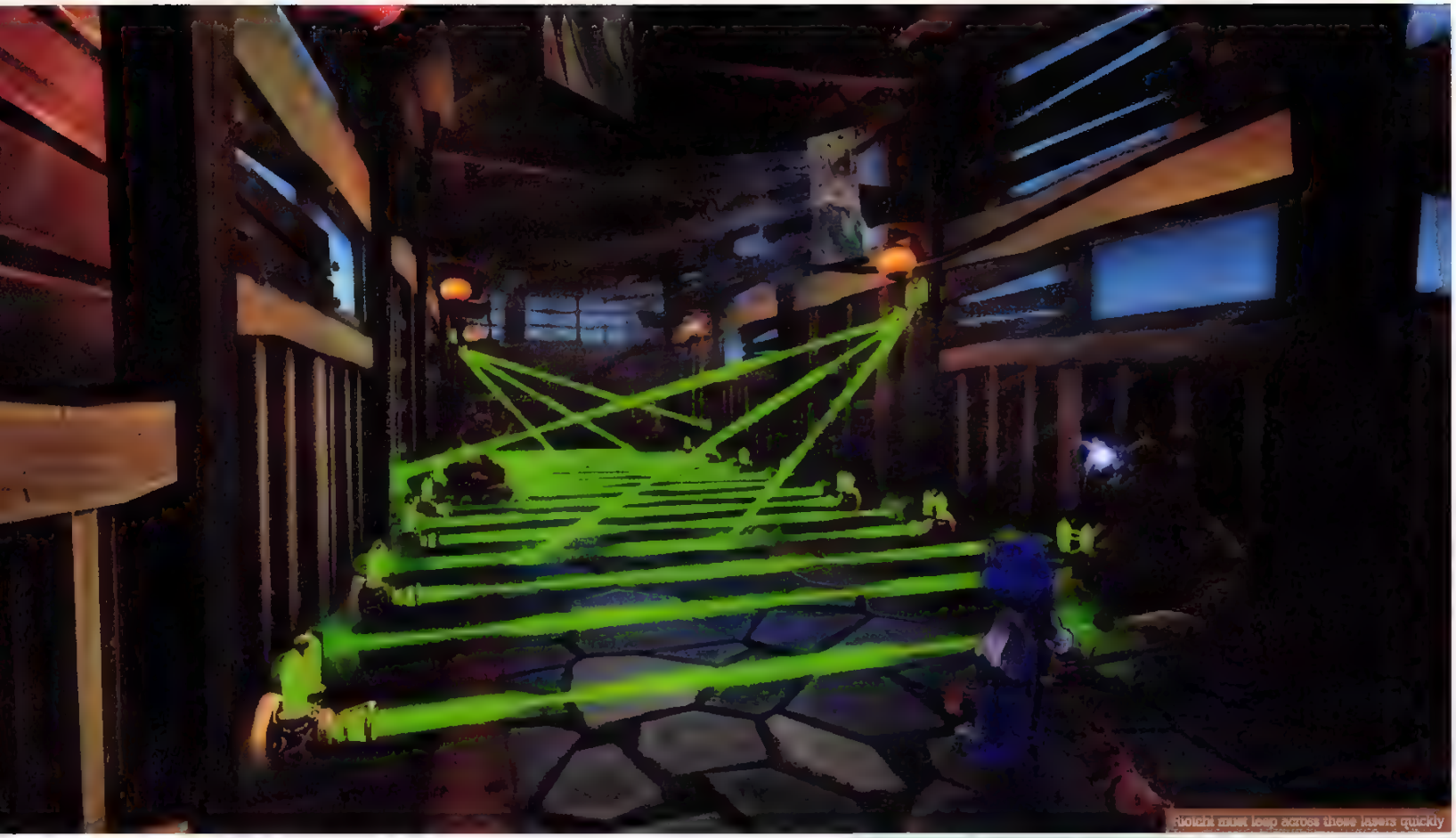


learned of his ninja ancestor through the Thievius Raccoonus, a tome passed down through the Cooper lineage to preserve their burgling techniques. It seems that much of Sly's time-traveling adventure will involve rescuing his ancestors from various predicaments. Through a gorgeous cartoon cutscene (created by Ghostbot, the animation team responsible for the Esurance commercials), we learn that Rioichi was not only proficient in ninjitsu, but is also the inventor of sushi. The nimble raccoon used his world famous sushi shop as a front to distract from his constant ninja-ing. However, a mysterious menace framed Rioichi, orchestrating a ruse in which the Shogun was poisoned by bad sushi claimed to come from the famous shop. With his ancestor behind bars, Sly must traverse pagoda rooftops and use a skill learned from Rioichi in the Thievius Raccoonus: the ability to nimbly perch on precarious spires.

Before he can penetrate the prison, Sly must stealthily acquire pieces of armor from the samurai boar guards patrolling the town. It's a visual treat watching the agile raccoon glide across the cobblestone bridges among the colorful Japanese foliage to sneak up on the aloof sentries. The way the noble thief's tail twitches as he gets in position to steal a piece of armor is a testament to the talented artists' attention to detail. Sly's exaggerated marching animation when he dons the oversized set of armor is as hilarious as it is impressive. The crisp cel-shaded visuals and fluid animations will put your jaw on the floor.

Sly manages to sneak past the dimwitted boar guards while wearing the armor, but not before one of them points out his below average stature, complete with a reference to a classic Star Wars line. The trademark sense of humor of Sly Cooper is in full effect here, and I gladly chuckled along. Once within the prison, Sly uses the clumsy armor to negate the flames of fire-breathing dragon statues while evading bladed pendulums. A generation-bridging family reunion occurs when Sly discovers Rioichi's cage and frees his ancestor. The ninja master (voiced by Steve Blum, voice of Shadows of the Damned's



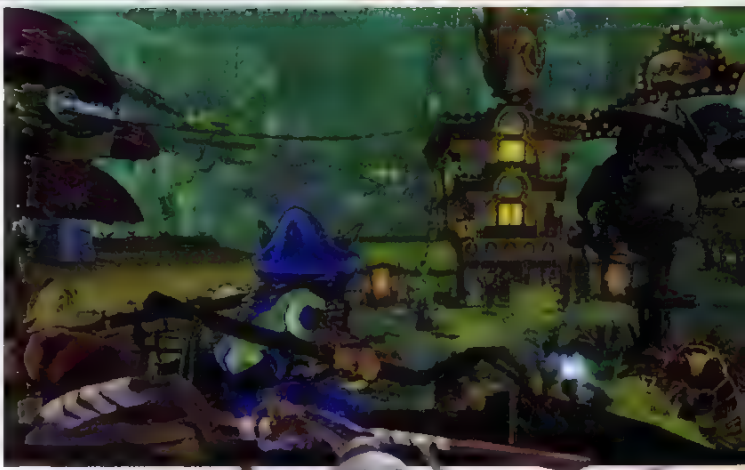


Rioichi must leap across these lasers quickly

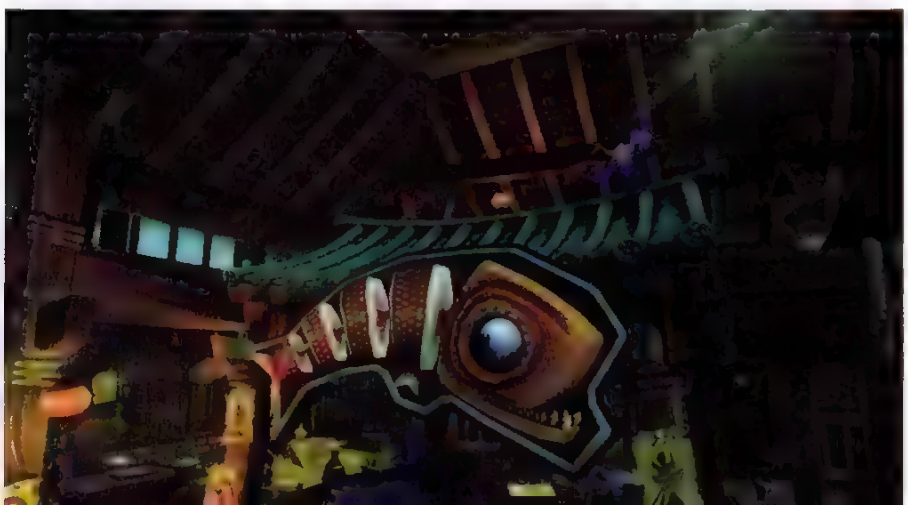
Garcia Hotspur and Bulletstorm's Grayson Hunt) speaks in philosophical, Confucius-style proverbs, many of which fly straight over Sly's head to hilarious results. At this point Rioichi becomes a fully playable character.

Rioichi celebrates his newfound freedom by immediately setting off to reclaim his sushi shop, which has been occupied by samurai swine. The ninja raccoon must reclaim a set of sushi knives to unlock a special door in his restaurant. Rioichi spends much of this section lifting the crucial cutlery from unaware guards. Further evidence of time paradoxes are found when he enters a room with laser traps, something that even non-historians should know don't belong in ancient Japan. It turns out the spire-perching technique Sly learned from Rioichi via the Thevius Raccoonus represents only a portion of the ninja's skills. Rioichi must use his exclusive leaping dragon technique to bound long distances above the lasers across rickety banzai trees, a feat Sly will never be able to learn. Thankfully, Rioichi appears in the gang's hideout as a selectable character alongside Murray, Bentley, and Sly. Sanzaru says there will be plenty of collectibles and hidden areas that only specific characters like Rioichi will be able to access, increasing the game's replayability. Rioichi eventually makes his way to the furnace room and is able to get his restaurant back in working condition

Beyond the eventual boss battle between Sly and the temporally displaced tin cup dictator El Jefe, we don't know much of what else happens in feudal Japan. Sanzaru is also staying tight-lipped about other eras Sly and his crew will be visiting. The Thevius Raccoonus contains Cooper ancestors spanning from ancient Egypt to the Wild West, so Sanzaru has a wealth of interesting time periods to choose from. Regardless of where this time-trekking adventure takes us, the engaging platforming, witty dialogue, interesting new characters, and beautiful presentation have us excited. » **Tim Turi**







Gears of War 3: RAAM's Shadow

New campaign DLC brings the return of a fallen foe

» **Platforms**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4 Player Shooter (4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Epic Games

» **Developer**
Epic Games

» **Release**
December 13

With Gears of War 3's second DLC pack, Epic Games is going back to the origins of the shooter series. RAAM's Shadow places players in the timeline before the first game, but after Emergence Day.

Much like Gears of War 3's shifting story, the campaign switches up the playable character pool. In most levels, players control a new COG squad, but in an exciting twist for fans, other levels put you in the boots of an elite Locust squad. Best of all, the lead player controls General RAAM himself.

You won't begin the new content as the towering Locust general, however. RAAM's Shadow begins in the city of Ilima, where an ominous Krylistorm is scheduled to arrive in mere hours. Considering this takes place earlier in the timeline, players get a chance to revisit characters like Kim and Tai. As the latter explains to a child about how life is full of struggles, he's proven correct by an onslaught of Corpsers, Boomers, and Bloodmounts.

Player one takes control of Michael Barrick, a cigar chomping, male pattern baldness-afflicted COG soldier fans of the Gears comics should recognize. Throughout the franchise, players traditionally controlled a squad leader. In RAAM's Shadow, Barrick is the main character even though Kim is the leader of Zeta Squad. If you're playing four player co-op, Kim, Tai, and a new female character named Valera round out the squad.

Since the emergence holes are back, you should stock up on frag grenades whenever you get a chance. We had to plug up plenty of these spawn points during our play session. After the COG take out enough Locust with their Lancers, Longshots, frag grenades, and a turret, it becomes clear that larger scale weaponry is required. Corpsers begin sweeping in and overwhelming Zeta Squad, and the inevitable "Get the Hammer!" call comes in. Instead of the standard Hammer of Dawn mechanic, RAAM's Shadow introduces a new top-down view for targeting. As you observe the action from the satellite's perspective, it couldn't be easier to drop the Hammer directly onto the invading Corpsers.

Once the Hammer has done its job, it's time for Zeta Squad to search for civilian survivors. It's odd exploring these city environments before they're completely destroyed; the sight of green grass and somewhat intact buildings is almost foreign to the series. Barrick and the rest of the squad begin searching a bank, thinking that survivors may have taken shelter downstairs in the vault. There, they discover a young (and surprisingly skinny) Jace Stratton. He joins up with your crew, but his smaller frame and not-quite-intimidating baseball bat make it clear that he won't be much help if the Locust return.

Here the action changes perspective to the Locust war effort. For the first time in the series' campaign, players step into the oversized boots of RAAM himself. Controlling him feels considerably different than the COG soldiers, but his offensive capabilities are a blast. When he's not targeting anyone, a swarm of Kryll surround RAAM and deflect incoming bullets.







The DLC's cast will include old and new characters

He's not invincible, however, as fire and explosions still damage him. These Kryll are also his ammunition, as he can target COG soldiers and direct the swarm around them. Within seconds, unshielded soldiers are vaporized by the Kryll attack. Soldiers behind turrets or in armored suits aren't safe, either. The swarm turns them into a bloody mess all the same. Players never run out of Kryll, but the swarm ability operates on a cooldown timer. If you have time left after taking down one soldier, you can direct them to another using the right analog stick.

For close-quarters combat, RAAM uses his gigantic sword. He swipes the weapon for a melee attack, or charges at foes in a manner identical to the Retro Lancer. After one COG soldier was downed in a firefight, we picked him up and took his head clean off in a brutal execution.

If you're playing co-op, your three friends assume control of two Elite Maulers and one Elite Theron. The former are outfitted with reflective shields that send COG bullets back to their shooters, and the latter features a Retro Sawed-Off that comes with two blades. Enemies can be impaled and then blasted into oblivion with a pull of the shotgun's trigger. Throughout the DLC, players frequently switch back and forth between this group and Zeta Squad.

We played about an hour of RAAM's Shadow, and came away impressed by its breadth of content. Epic estimates the new content lasts roughly three and a half hours, and players who purchased the Season Pass receive it at no additional charge. Everyone else can purchase it for 1,200 Microsoft Points. Alongside this DLC, Epic is also releasing a free multiplayer pack that includes remakes of Clocktower and Bullet Marsh. If what we've seen is any indication, fans of the newest entry in the series have a lot of promising content on the horizon.

» **Dan Ryckert**







Darksiders II

New screens of Death's quest

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii U

» **Style**
1 Player Action/
Adventure

» **Publisher**
THQ

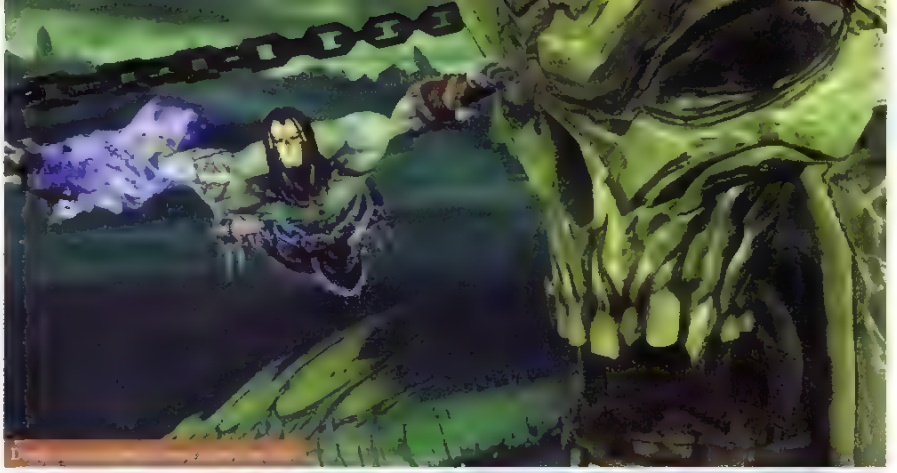
» **Developer**
Vigil Games

» **Release**
2012

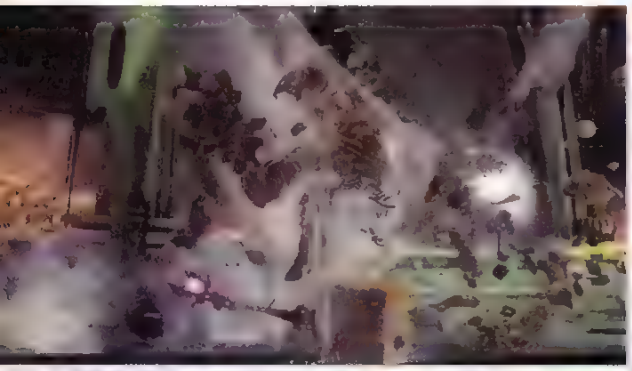
We've been excited about Darksiders II ever since we revealed it back in our July issue, and its 2012 release couldn't come soon enough. Vigil's sequel looks to retain the "God of War meets Zelda" gameplay that made the original game a favorite, but the team is aiming for a larger scale than ever. Considering the first game took place during the Apocalypse, those are some big shoes to fill.

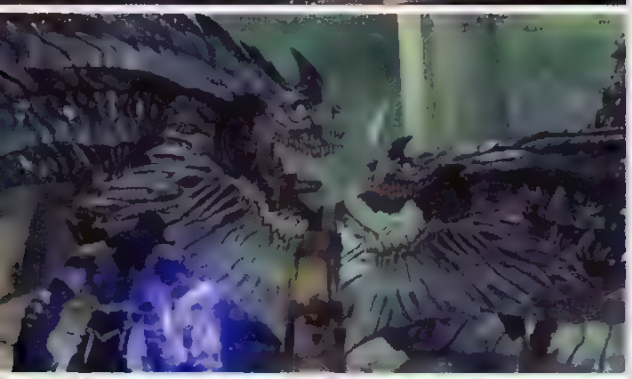
If you saw the game's E3 trailer, you probably caught a few quick glimpses of the battles Death is getting into. With his shape-shifting scythes, giant hammer, and new platforming abilities like wall-jumping, we expect to cause plenty of trouble as this second Horseman of the Apocalypse.

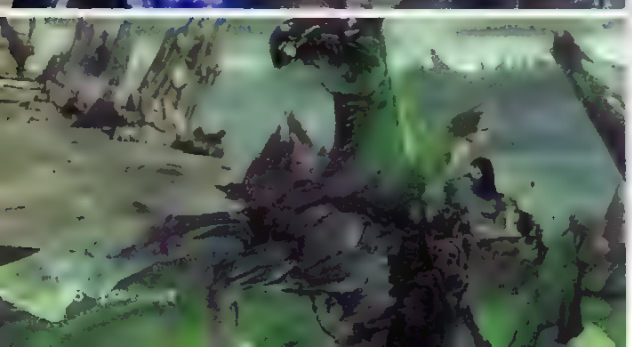
"Overall, the physical size of world you explore in Darksiders II is roughly four times that of the first game," says producer Ryan Stefanelli. Considering that Vigil says a single hub world in Darksiders II is as large as the entirety of its predecessor, it sounds like we'll have no shortage of time in the Abyss. Look for it on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 when it launches in the middle of 2012, followed by the Wii U version when the console becomes available. In the meantime, check out these new images of Death's adventure. » **Dan Ryckert**














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Mario Kart 7

A classic power-up hits the Mushroom Kingdom's courses



» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
December 4

It's not a Nintendo console without a proper Mario Kart title, and the 3DS is getting its first taste of the classic racer this December. Mario Kart 7 has eight-player online play, new glider and underwater sections, a first-person view, and kart customization. As an added bonus for longtime Mario fans, the Super Leaf is making its Mario Kart debut.

Nintendo seems eager to revisit this fan-favorite form of Mario, since it also appears in Super Mario 3D Land (see our review on page 126). As it does in the platformers, Mario Kart 7's Super Leaf grants the user a raccoon tail, which can be used to swipe incoming shells and projectiles away from your kart. You can also use it offensively. Is Bowser giving you grief on the perilous Rainbow Road? Just give him a swipe of your tail when he's near the edge and he'll be waiting for Lakitu's fishing pole.

Fans know what to expect from this mega-selling franchise by now, but that didn't stop us from getting excited about its 3DS debut when we played it at E3. The Mario Kart series hasn't had a bad game yet, and we see no reason for that streak to end now. » **Dan Ryckert**



Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

Stop tapping your foot and start tapping your 3DS





Nobuo Uematsu and the rest of the talented Final Fantasy composers have created a legacy of memorable tunes. The live Distant Worlds concert travels across the globe to deliver fully orchestrated nostalgia to fans. Now you can enjoy the best tunes from these glorious adventures on your 3DS by tapping along with the stylus.

Gameplay in Theatrhythm is simple – the player taps the stylus on the touchscreen in rhythm with brightly colored symbols appearing on the top screen. Songs are divided into three categories: battle, field, and event. During battle songs, you must furiously tap along with one of the series' many rousing fight anthems. Watching four chibi-style Final Fantasy characters ward off attacking monsters while keeping time with a fully orchestrated "One Winged Angel" is a charming treat. For the epic field themes, you trace a flowing guideline as an adventurer wanders the open plains. Finally, you play the event themes by holding and flicking notes as a memorable Final Fantasy scene plays in the background. For example, I watched Tidus and Yuna make out in a pool while playing along with "Suteki da ne," from Final Fantasy X.

My time with Theatryhthm sailed by faster than a Chocobo at the Gold Saucer. I had such a good time jamming out to my favorite Final Fantasy songs that Square Enix practically had to wrench the 3DS out of my hands. I can't wait to play around with the various difficulty levels and discover the full set list. As of now Theatrhythm Final Fantasy is set for a Japan-only launch, but we're praying to Bahamut that it arrives stateside. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Music

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
TBA

The Song List So Far

"Final Fantasy Theme" (FF)
"Battle Scene" (FF)
"Rebel Army Theme" (FF II)
"Battle on the Big Bridge" (FF V)
"Tina" (FF VI)
"Decisive Battle" (FF VII)
"One-Winged Angel" (FF VII)
"Waltz for the Moon" (FF VIII)
"To Zanarkand" (FF X)
"Suteki da ne" (FF XI)
"Sunleth Waterscape" (FF XIII)
"Blinded By Light" (FF XIII)





Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

A drop of hope for 3DS owners

My experience with the Kingdom Hearts series is extremely limited, so when Square Enix plopped the new 3DS title in my hands I didn't know what to expect. While this Japanese-only demo left me scratching my head regarding specific details of Riku and Sora's quest, I came away with a solid grasp of the game's fun, fast-paced gameplay.

What little we do know about Dream Drop Distance's story is that it takes place after Kingdom Hearts II, and that Sora and Riku must save several Disney-themed worlds from a sleep stasis. Waking these whimsical worlds means entering their altered dream states, defeating Dream Eaters to return them to normal, and in the process earning the two heroes their Keyblade Master certification.

I chose to play as Sora during my time in Traverse Town. After my brightly dressed protagonist awoke in the gorgeous cartoon village, I spent a few minutes talking to a spiky haired boy with headphones on. This is none other than Neku from the underappreciated gem The World Ends With You. Square Enix wants to add some fresh faces to the series' crossover craze, and this character is the first glimpse of a non-Final Fantasy or Disney character infiltrating the world. All we know about Neku at this point is that he's looking for his companion from The World Ends With You, Shiki.

After the two went their separate ways I got a feel for Dream Drop Distance's high-flying gameplay. Sora is remarkably agile in this handheld entry, with the ability to fly through the air and spin around lampposts. Cruising along the beautifully rendered rooftops hunting for enemies was surprisingly entertaining. Combat feels similar to the core Kingdom Hearts games, but flashy moves like a ground-pound aren't restrained by cooldowns.

Sora is also accompanied by two Dream Eater allies who can be teamed up with for devastating co-op attacks. While destroying these parasitic Dream Eaters is a main objective, partying up with some of them is necessary to progress. One is a big panda-type critter that grabs Sora by the legs and swings him around like a fashionable mace. The other is a bizarre hamster critter that can be mounted like a crowd-clearing hopalong ball. These two absurd companions added an enjoyable extra layer to an already solid combat system. The game is also confirmed to support the 3DS' awkward second circle pad attachment, though during my time with the game I only used the traditional controls.

Eventually Sora and the gang end up in an intense battle against a gigantic purple gorilla monster. The colossal primate enjoyed throwing Sora onto his back and pummeling him with both fists, but a steady volley of cooperative Dream Eater attacks drained his health bar. As the boss' life ended, so did my time with Dream Drop Distance.

The fact that I enjoyed this 3DS title as much as I did without having a clue what was happening story-wise has me optimistic that fans will love it. Though the game is not yet confirmed for a Western release, I'm confident we'll hear some good news after the game arrives in Japan next spring. » **Tim Turi**

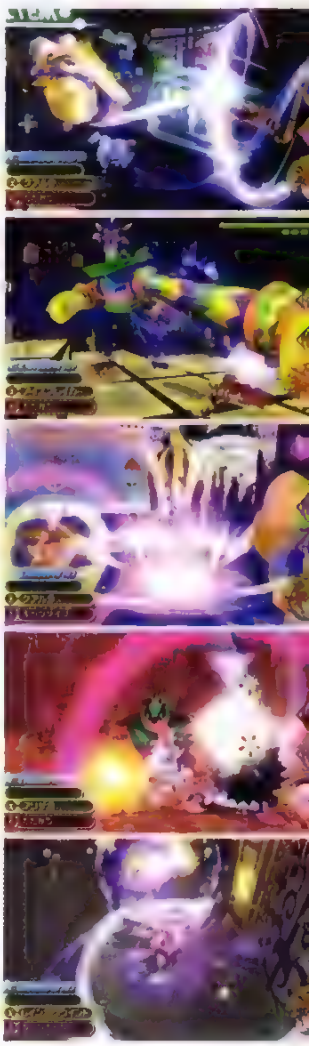
» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
TBA



Ninja Gaiden 3

Team Ninja makes the case for an easier Ninja Gaiden experience







» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Tecmo Koei

» **Developer**
Team Ninja

» **Release**
2012



With the two previous Ninja Gaiden games, Tomonobu Itagaki and Team Ninja raised the bar for fast-paced, punishing action games. As the first game in the core series to be released after Itagaki's departure from the studio, Ninja Gaiden 3 has a lot to live up to if it hopes to satisfy players skilled enough to master the previous titles. Hardcore fans may have eaten up the extreme challenge provided by the series thus far, but Team Ninja producer Yosuke Hayashi is hoping to satisfy that group of fans while remaining inviting to a more casual crowd. By offering the distinct hero and ninja play styles, he's hoping that there's something for everyone.

For those already familiar with the series, ninja mode won't be a surprise. Playing this style will test your reflexes and ability to recognize enemy patterns as you attack, block, evade, and counter-attack like you've been trained to do in the previous games. This mode will retain the difficulty fans are used to, and we wouldn't be surprised to see even harder modes unlocked upon completion.

Hero mode is new to Ninja Gaiden 3, and will be a huge departure from the standard gameplay in the franchise. All blocking and evading will be performed automatically, so the more casual crowd won't have to worry about avoiding incoming attacks. I asked Hayashi if it would even be possible to die, and he responded, "As for whether players will ever see a 'Game Over' screen...we haven't decided yet." We're sure to see a certain crowd scoff at this the hero style, but Hayashi is putting it in place to ensure fans of all skill levels get to experience the game's story.

To say the narrative in previous Ninja Gaiden games was scattershot would be generous. Team Ninja is looking to change that with this sequel by focusing heavily on the consequences of Ryu Hayabusa's history. At the outset of the game, a cloaked and masked alchemist named The Regent of the Mask places a curse on the ninja that causes his mental burden to manifest itself physically. As a result, his arm begins to appear bloody, and this effect intensifies as he murders more and more victims.

Players are supposed to feel that the enemies are human beings, so the cartoonish decapitations and dismemberment have been nixed for Ninja Gaiden 3. Instead, enemies plead for their lives, attempt to crawl away from the ninja while injured, and run in fear after seeing an intimidating attack like Ryu's new dragon ninpo (which summons a flaming dragon to clear out the majority of enemies in the area). However, fans shouldn't worry that the violence has been toned down along with the difficulty. You may not see heads flying across the screen, but I witnessed gallons of blood spilled during my time with the game.

Team Ninja hasn't released many details regarding the game's multiplayer component, but we do know it supports up to eight players and at least two different modes. Co-op play places two partners in various missions based in the single-player campaign, while team battles make up the competitive portion of multiplayer. Hayashi explained that the theme of online play is "World of Ninjas," featuring players starting as grunts and attempting to work their way up to a level similar to Hayabusa's. A leveling system allows players to customize their ninja's look and weapons, and Hayashi promised "unique ninja-like spins" on the competitive gameplay.

It's clear that Team Ninja is trying new things with the franchise. We still expect the same fast-paced action the series is known for, but the focus on story, the new hero play mode, and online play should guarantee a different experience than previous entries. We'll find out if the game really does appeal to both casual and hardcore players when it releases early next year. » **Dan Ryckert**







The Darkness II

Tearing the Brotherhood limb from limb

Fans of the 2007 original Darkness game will have to wait a little bit longer for the next installment of mobster Jackie Estacado's violent saga. The delay will allow time for more polish, of course, but it also pulls the game out of the crowded holiday season into the much clearer February timeframe. In the meantime, 2K has provided new details on Jackie's enemies and darkness powers. » **Bryan Vore**



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

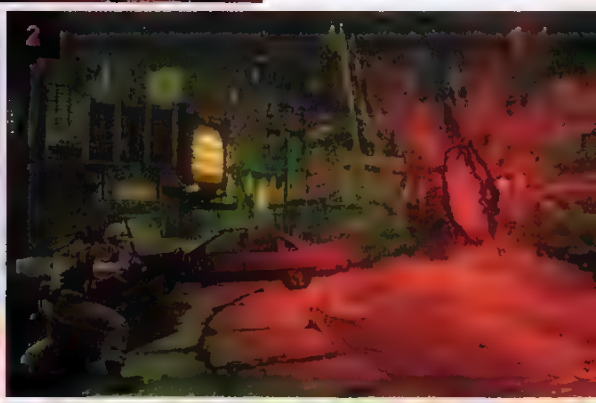
» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

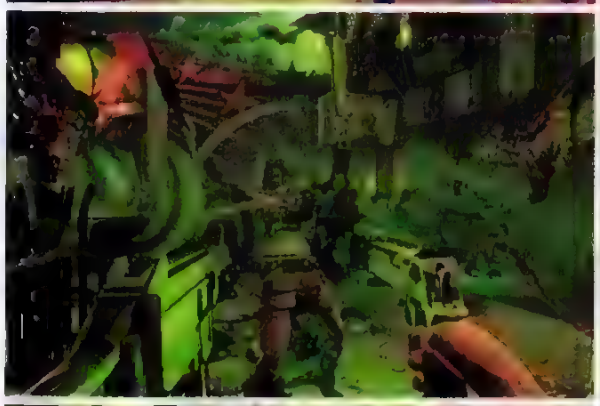
» **Publisher**
2K Games

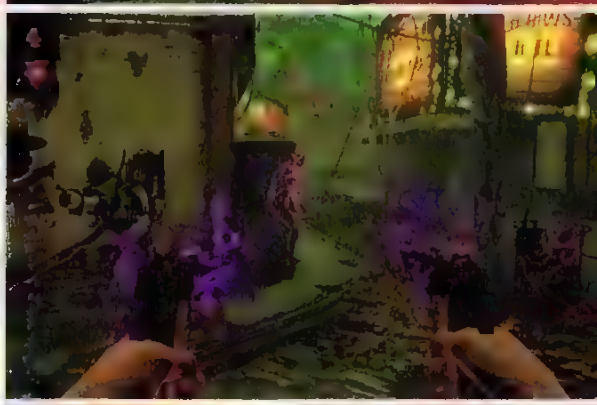
» **Developer**
Digital Extremes

» **Release**
February 7













1 The Brotherhood

A character in The Darkness II describes the Brotherhood as "the great granddaddy of all secret societies." The group was originally formed over a thousand years ago to keep the Darkness in check. Now it seems they've become twisted over the years and want the evil being for themselves. After centuries battling the Darkness, they know all about its weaknesses, primarily light. Some carry shoulder-mounted spotlights, others use special riot shields that block bullets and Jackie's slashing demon arms. He can use another demon arm to yank the shield away and toss it aside, but some energy whip-carrying Brotherhood members can give you a dose of your own medicine by pulling guns out of your hands from afar.

2 Black Hole

Here Jackie throws out an energy field that turns into what looks like a big red eye of Sauron. It then sucks in every nearby enemy and piece of debris. Finally, it snaps shut crushing everything inside with blood and guts flying everywhere.

3 Swarm

Rather than being a direct attack, swarm deploys a green cloud around foes that makes them flail wildly and opens more defended enemies to attack.

4 Gun Channeling

When this is triggered, your guns and all nearby enemies start to glow purple. This enables you to see targets through any obstruction, and when you shoot them they explode due to the enchanted bullets.

5 The Darkling

The multiple darklings from the original game are replaced with a single creature this time. This allows him to have more personality as a persistent character pulling guys out from behind cover, urinating on defeated foes, and impulsively driving a fuel truck through the front gate of an enemy base.

6 Quad-Wielding

Two guns plus two Darkness tentacles equals quad-wielding. We saw Jackie throw a parking meter at a thug, whip another up into the air and shoot him like a clay pigeon, grab a car door as a shield, shoot guys through the window hole, and throw it and decapitate someone. The Darkness II hasn't been rated by the ESRB yet, but we're guessing that it's not going to be E10+.

Binary Domain

Play nice or suffer the consequences









» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Action
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Sega CS1

» Release
February 14

Human-like robots revolting against their creators has been a frequent theme in film, television, and video games for decades. While it's been done a million times, it's still as good an excuse as any to mow down countless mechanical baddies. Yakuza creator Toshihiro Nagoshi is exploring a similar theme with Sega's upcoming Binary Domain, but he's hoping to add an intriguing twist to the squad-based shooter via its consequence system.

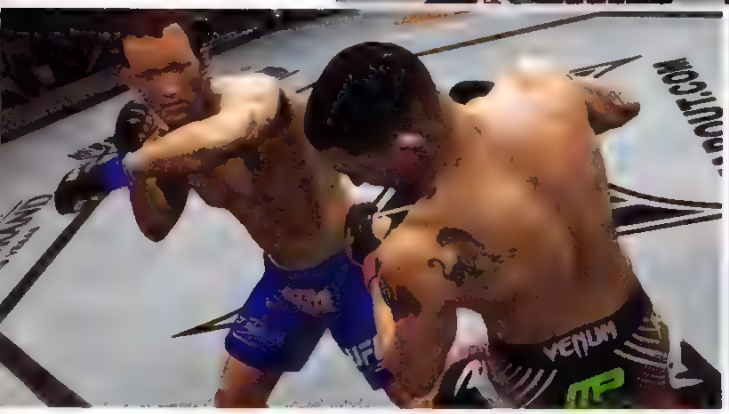
At the outset of each mission, you'll be tasked with selecting your squad based on whose fighting style is best suited for the job. Playing as protagonist Dan Marshall, you'll have the opportunity to order your squad to perform various actions. Rather than acting accordingly no matter the situation, their cooperation will depend on how you've treated them. If you've put them in danger, made inappropriate comments to them ("You idiot!" is an option if they mess up), or issued bad commands, they might flat-out refuse that cover you requested. Rather than working as a group, your squad will be an uncoordinated mess, fighting on their own without any guidance. However, if you've performed well in combat and treated your partners with respect, they'll be quick to lay down some cover fire when you need to scurry to the next objective. These interactions will usually take place during the gameplay, but Sega has said that your actions will also lead the story down different paths.

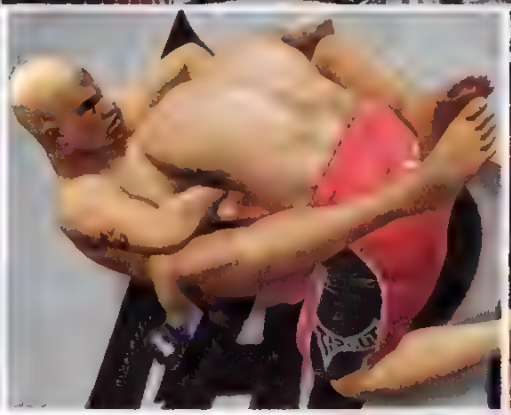
While the core action resembles cover-based shooters like Gears of War, the trailers for Binary Domain have teased some gameplay variety. One section appears to be a chase on jet-skis, and another features soldiers firing assault rifles while sliding down a flooded incline. The game's version of the year 2080 features a rising sea level as a main threat, so we wouldn't be surprised to see several water-based sections.

Rising sea levels seem ominous enough, but the more immediate danger is probably the army of malicious, heavily armed robots bent on destroying mankind. The shady Amada corporation has been creating these "hollow children" for years, programming their A.I. with ego and emotion. From the looks of the game, it should feature gunfights ranging from massive Vanquish-esque skirmishes to boss battles against giant minigun-wielding robots. Millions of robots have been gunned down in the history of video games, but we're hoping Binary Domain's gameplay variety and consequence system make the experience feel new again. **» Dan Ryckert**


SOMEWHERE IN THERE
THERE'S A
MAN IN THERE
Old Spice
SMELL BETTER THAN
YOURSELF



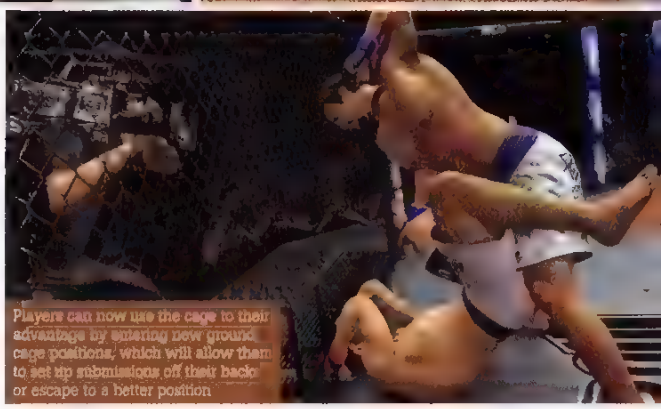






UFC Undisputed 3

THQ takes Pride in its ultimate fighter



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-player online)

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Yuke's Osaka

» **Release**
January

THQ's UFC series has been the dominant mixed martial arts fighting experience for some time, and with the future of EA's own MMA series in question, THQ's dominance on the mat may remain unchallenged. Early next year, UFC Undisputed returns to the octagon with intense toe-to-toe combat, an improved visual presentation system, and more than 150 fighters.

One of the more significant updates to THQ's UFC series is the introduction of the Pride Fighting Championship license. At one time, Pride was the biggest mixed martial arts organization in the world, but the company was sold to – and ultimately merged with – UFC in 2007. UFC Undisputed 3 features many of Pride's official announcers and Japanese MMA rules, which allow for soccer-style kicks, head stomps, and ground knees to the head. All of this should allow Pride fans to relive the organization's glory days.

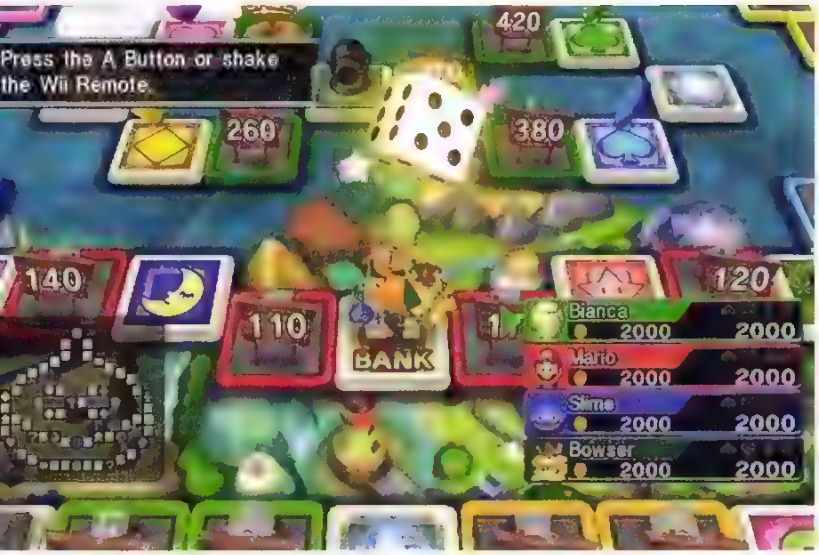
The new Pride mode wouldn't mean much if UFC's fighting mechanics didn't remain polished, and Yuke's has added a number of features to help sharpen an already good fighting system. A new natural combo system allows players to create their own combos where the type of strikes chained together dictate the speed and damage of each successive attack. Quick jabs now have the ability to interrupt an opponent's strong strikes, and players will now be able to TKO their opponent if they inflict a certain amount of leg damage. All of the improvements to the combat system make UFC Undisputed sound like a more refined, strategic experience.

Some of the strongest fighters in the world only come alive when they are working their opponent on the mat. In light of this, Yuke's has reworked its submission system to create a more compelling ground game. This new intuitive, graphical system indicates which fighter is gaining ground in a submission hold and displays visual feedback, so players know why they lost a submission hold. The game also now features a wide variety of new submission moves such as standing guillotines, rear naked chokes, flying heel hooks, mounted gogoplatas, and a brand new cage submission system that lets players use the walls of the Octagon to their advantage.

THQ allowed the UFC series a short break so that Yuke's could refine its next edition, and it looks like the extra time wasn't wasted. The addition of Pride mode, the brand new submission system, as well as new features like the option to play using simplified controls, should all help make this an undisputedly polished experience. UFC Undisputed 3 looks like it will be a strong contender for fighting fans' dollars when it comes out early next year. » **Ben Reeves**

Fortune Street

Fortune street, money never sleeps



Itadaki Street may sound like a place you'd get lost while vacationing in Japan, but this game franchise (literally translated as Top Street) has been around for nearly 20 years. This holiday, Square will be bringing this Monopoly-like board game experience to the U.S. for the first time.

Rebranded Fortune Street for its American audience, the game functions like a version of Monopoly starring video game characters. Players can pick from a list of popular Dragon Quest characters such as a Slime, Bianca from Dragon Quest V, and Jessica from Dragon Quest VIII. If RPGs aren't your thing, you might find the list of playable Super Mario characters such as Mario, Wario, Donkey Kong, and Birdo a little more to your liking. Either way, there will be nearly 30 playable characters in total, spread out across the two big-name franchises.

It takes money to make money, and as up to four players race around one of Fortune Street's 15 boards, they'll buy, sell, and trade properties with their friends. Players who manage their portfolios well can purchase more shops and collect symbols that can be sold for gold and then turned around and invested in more properties. Players can also invest their gains in a fluctuating stock market. When players buy shops that are adjacent to one another, their property values grow and they can extort more money from those who land on their real estate.

Monopoly tends to stretch on long past your initial interest in the game (which for me is about five minutes), so hopefully we won't grow bored with this digital facsimile. Let's hope Fortune Street is more fun than my high school social studies teacher's attempts to make financial management a game. If it's not, I'm totally ditching to hang out at the arcade. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
Wii

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Board

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Armor Project

» **Release**
December 5





This and all other screenshots have been taken from a CG concept video for the game. We don't know what the actual gameplay will look like, but Inafune is confident that it will be close to what is seen here

Kaio: King of Pirates

Keiji Inafune's first game since Capcom

Keiji Inafune was one of Capcom's secret weapons, a key creative player heavily involved in titles like Mega Man, Dead Rising, and Onimusha. Inafune left Capcom recently in order to pursue opportunities with his own development studio.

King of Pirates is Inafune's second announced game since leaving Capcom, and it will be exclusive to the 3DS. Inafune stated that he wanted to reach a younger audience with the game, and expects the user base of the 3DS to expand significantly in the future.

King of Pirates follows the Chinese lore of Sangokushi, which us North American gamers will most likely recognize as the stories covered in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms games. Inafune basically wants to make a pirate version of that story, and is planning a trilogy to tell the whole tale.

There aren't a whole lot of details around how the game plays, but Inafune has stated that there will be ship-to-ship combat as well as person-to-person combat. You will be able to pick from 300 characters during battle.

A CG concept trailer online shows off the art direction of the game, but no actual gameplay or screenshots are available just yet. The game has only been announced for a Japanese release so far, but the official site of the game is available to read in English, which is a strong hint that we're likely to see the game outside of Japan. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» **Platform**
Nintendo 3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Marvelous AQL

» **Developer**
Intercept

» **Release**
TBA









NFL Blitz

Bombs away

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
January

After trying to harness the spirit of Midway's old NFL Blitz arcade title in the failed NFL Street and NFL Tour console franchises, EA Sports is going to the source to get it right. Similar to the company's resurrection of NBA Jam last year, EA Sports is bringing back the old seven-on-seven football classic now with HD looks and all the online trimmings for XBLA and PSN.

NBA Jam succeeded because it stuck so closely to the original – a lesson not lost on the game's designer Yun Bialoskursky, who says that the team is making sure that Blitz is "staying true to the original" while still giving "that old flavor some new flair." Accordingly, the EA Tiburon-developed game uses all the old playbooks and plays, the same top-down camera, original announcer Tim Kitzrow (who worked on the recent NBA Jam), and also uses a lot of the old animations (augmented by new motion capture and graphics, of course). The game will also use cheat codes for gameplay, stadiums, and other tricks, but the gameplay ones will be blocked out for online matches – although you can use them for offline play between friends.

It wouldn't be a Blitz game without the input of original Blitz designer and programmer Mark Turmell. Turmell was briefly employed by EA Tiburon for these EA homages, and Bialoskursky says that the team "couldn't have done it without him," describing Turmell's ability to know exactly how the new game should feel in order to capture that old Blitz magic.

Although we all want EA's Blitz to feel just like Midway's iconic versions, that's not enough to make this Blitz a good game. Bialoskursky and the team know this, and are adding their own stamp on the series. The Blitz Gauntlet single-player campaign, where you work your way up the ladder against NFL teams, features boss battles against fantasy teams and characters at key junctures. You play these bosses as you would a real NFL team, but the gameplay receives a tweak through a selection of on-the-field power-ups.

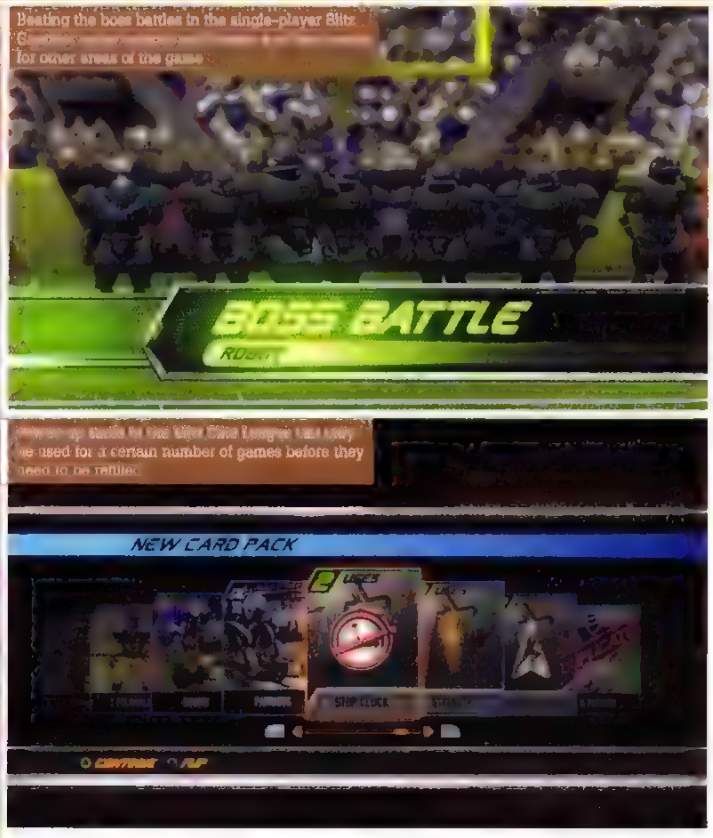
Furthermore, Blitz is trying to leave its own mark via extensive online modes. The Elite League is similar to Madden's Ultimate Team card team-building mode, but is more collection based. The focus is on turning in sets of cards to receive individual player cards with high-end stats. Earn all 12 of the normal player cards for any given NFL team, and you can turn them in for a single Pro Player card, which has two of the four attribute ratings maxed out and an infinite contract length. If you collect and turn in all the teams in any NFL division, you can then get an Ultimate Player card, with all maxed ratings. Blitz's Elite League also has power-ups, as well as pink slip games where you can win the card of your choosing from your opponent's deck.

For those not into Elite's collection aspects, the more traditional Blitz Battles online mode has you (or you and a co-op friend) work your way up three battle boards (local, regional, and national) each with four tiers, facing special rank-up games against top-tier opponents towards the ultimate goal of the Blitz Hall of Fame.

Given the success of NBA Jam – and fans' hope that EA would follow up with NFL Blitz – it's clear that Midway's original arcade blueprint still resonates with gamers today. But with how EA's previous Blitz-style titles have failed in the past, it's also evident that nothing is as easy as it seems. Hopefully, EA Tiburon can blend old school gameplay with new online ideas to once and for all give arcade football fans what they've been looking for. » **Matthew Kato**


83
24
42
Pittsburgh Steelers


15


BOSS BATTLE
NEW CARD PACK



Max Payne 3

At long last, another look at Max Payne 3 in action

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Rockstar Studios

» **Release**
March

Max is back. It feels good to type those words, especially in light of how long Rockstar went dark on the game following our cover story. The delay caused some to speculate that Max Payne 3 was destined to die in development hell. Fear not – Max Payne 3 is real, and I've seen it being played thanks to a recent demo. Not only is it real, it's shaping up to be one of my most anticipated titles of next year.

First, a quick summary of Max Payne 3's premise: A number of years have elapsed since the end of Max Payne 2, and time has not been kind to Max. He's long since left the NYPD and fallen into a haze of drugs and drink in his apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey. Opportunity knocks in the form of Raul Passos, an old acquaintance from the police force, who offers Max a job in private security in Sao Paulo, Brazil. At first, Max cynically declines. As always, the dialogue is gripping, hard-boiled, and frequently profane – a perfect fit for voice actor James McCaffrey, who reprises his role of Max and did a majority of the motion capturing for the character.

However, the job suddenly becomes a bit more appealing. Outside, a crew of mobsters pulls up headed by Anthony DeMarco, who wants revenge for Max killing his son. The building is under siege, and Max and Raul make a run for it, clearing out hallways of attackers in sequences similar to the action we enjoyed in the first two games. For a second it looks like Max is going to meet a premature end, but a strange homeless man saves his life for no apparent reason and engages our antihero in a small, almost surreal moment of conversation.

The second half of the demo finds Max (this time with a shaved head, beard, and about 25 more pounds of muscle), in the midst of a chase sequence in Sao Paulo. Max is attempting to keep Raul Passos' girlfriend, Giovanna, out of the clutches of the Cracha Preto, a paramilitary gang that terrorizes Sao Paulo. For reasons unexplained in the demo, Cracha Preto seems intent on killing her, but Max has other plans. In an extended shootout that takes place in a graveyard of broken-down city buses, I marvel at the game's exquisite production values. When its power is focused on tightly constructed environments, Rockstar's RAGE engine (which was used for Red Dead Redemption and Grand Theft Auto IV) produces a remarkable level of detail.

The game has great cinematography, and the highly destructible environments heighten the sense of drama during firefights. Pretty much everything that's not fundamental to the world's construction is capable of being blown to bits – a feature which was later shown off in an explosive gunfight at a gas station.

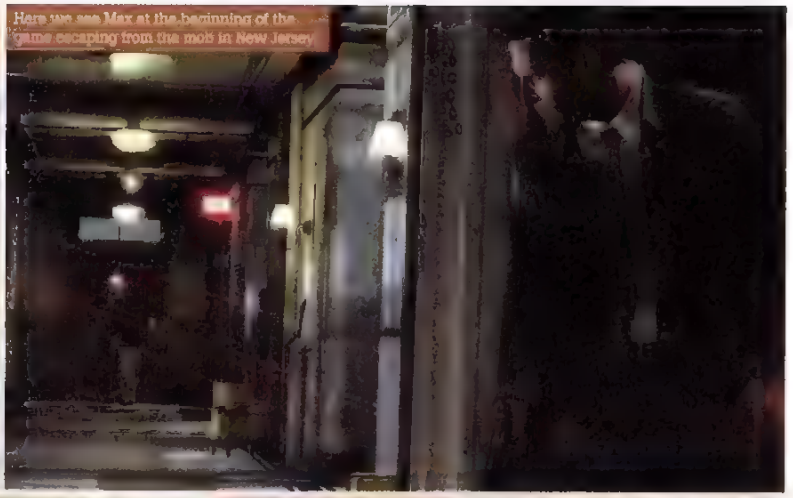
While the missions I witnessed appear to be a vastly improved, high-production value version of the classic Max Payne gameplay, the team is taking lengths to break up the action as well. There are many short bullet time events. One I witnessed took place in a warehouse area where Max was engaged in a firefight. Grabbing on to a cable hoist and riding it down to ground level, Max used a brief moment of unlimited bullet time to kill off every enemy in the room before he touched the floor. Rockstar says these small moments pop up in nearly every level.

Rockstar is also concentrating its forces on delivering elaborate set pieces, one of which I watched at the end of the demo. After Max escorts Giovanna to a bus station, the two commandeer a bus to escape the Cracha Preto. As the thugs give chase, Giovanna gets behind the wheel and Max begins a harrowing rail-shooting segment.

A second part of the demo revealed more information on the Bronco family that employs Max and Passos as security agents. Rodrigo Bronco's wife has been kidnapped (a common occurrence in modern-day Brazil). After a tense, emotional scene in which Rodrigo begins to question his family's future in the country, all hell breaks loose. Their office (conveniently made almost entirely of glass walls) comes under attack. A military unit breaks through the lobby, and a firefight ensues while Max tries to guide a cowardly tech worker to the security terminal to reset the building's defense system. It's mostly a chance to see the massive destructibility in action, as glass shatters and papers fly off desks.

This demo definitely showed the Max Payne faithful that this sequel retains the core values of the series – noir storytelling and explosive slow-motion gunplay. What is unknown is what other surprises Max Payne 3 has in store. I'm particularly intrigued by Rockstar's promise of unique and innovative multiplayer. With the game set to release in March of next year, I expect we'll find out more soon. » **Matt Helgeson**




Here we see Max at the beginning of the game escaping from the mob in New Jersey




Rockstar promises that the cover mechanics are much improved




Despite the tropical setting, Max Payne 3 sticks close to its noir roots





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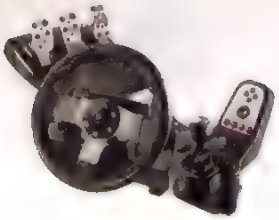
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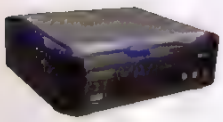
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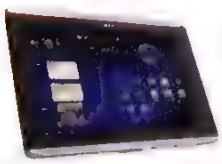
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reviews



gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

124 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

It's been five years since the launch of the Wii. It may have taken longer than we expected, but Nintendo has finally delivered an experience that uses the console to its full potential. Skyward Sword appeals to the hardcore gamer, uses full motion controls, and never feels gimmicky or goofy. Head to page 124 to find out why Skyward Sword may just be the best Zelda yet.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	A cold slap of rain.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

Rayman Origins

No Rabbids required



8.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Meet the cast of the Rayman series in an old-school style origin story

» **Graphics**
Brilliantly rendered worlds and characters easily make this one of the most beautiful games of the year

» **Sound**
The tunes are catchy, memorable, and span a variety of genres. Special props to the bugling fish

» **Playability**
The difficulty spikes near the end of the game, but the controls keep pace

» **Entertainment**
If you enjoy classic platform-hopping action, you owe it to yourself to play this game – even if you have no particular love for Rayman

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

gamefarmer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Platforming **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montpellier **Release** November 15 **ESRB** E10+

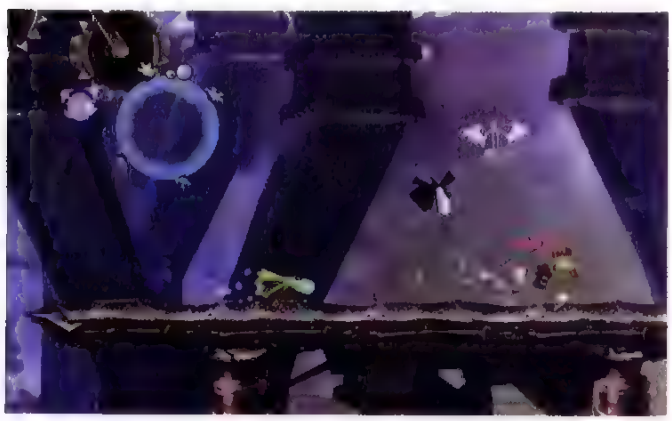
When I started playing Rayman Origins, I didn't have any particular fondness for the character or the series in general. I always felt that, amiable as he might be, Rayman was a junior varsity player in a league of professionals. Call me a convert. After putting down my controller for the last time, I can't wait to see what else Ubisoft has in store for Rayman, Globox, and the rest of the crew.

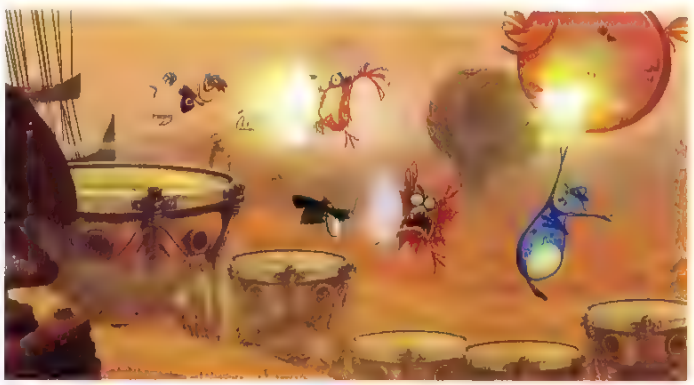
Rayman Origins is an undeniably beautiful game, with vibrant environments and richly defined characters. The graphical fidelity is astounding, even when you scrunch your face against the TV screen. Characters kick up eyelash-sized tufts of grass when they land, and the backgrounds are layered with loads of tiny details.

Ubisoft Montpellier didn't just create a pretty game, though. Rayman Origins holds its own with the best platformers out there. I was a little concerned about the game when I saw the intricate animations; while I appreciate how nice they can look, I also know that those lovingly crafted frames of animation can translate into imprecise controls and generally mushy-feeling action. Ubisoft managed to hit a sweet spot here, creating stunning characters that are also responsive.

That level of quality is present in the traditional platform-hopping stages and bleeds into more exotic areas, such as the mosquito-piloting shooter sections. Whenever I died (which wasn't an infrequent occasion), I usually had only myself to blame. Aside from a section with a cannon-blasting pirate ship, the game skillfully teeters on the edge of being fair but difficult.

One of the things that I appreciate about Rayman Origins is how it constantly shovels new things at the player. Whether it's a new ability, new gameplay styles, an unlockable character, or another breathtaking level to discover, Rayman doesn't stick to the same old path too long. And even when Rayman delves into themes and areas that seem to be mandatory for platform games in general, Ubisoft puts enough of a twist on the norm to make it seem fresh again. I never thought I'd look forward to playing underwater levels, but between the exceptional diving controls and the sea anemone backdrops that approach photorealism, I was absolutely hooked.





One of the only big problems I had with the game is how it blocks the end-game content until you've collected enough Electoons to pass. These smiling orbs are the game's currency, earned by finding hidden stashes and picking up a variety of collectibles scattered throughout the world. If you don't make collecting them a priority from the start, you may find yourself grinding earlier levels like I did. There are certainly worse ways to pass the time, but it feels like a chore, particularly when the final area is as lackluster as can be.

If you only know about Rayman from his affiliation with the now-ubiquitous Rabbids, that probably wasn't the best introduction. Rayman Origins is the proper way to catch up with the character, who finally has a game that puts him squarely in the majors. » **Jeff Cork**

Saints Row: The Third

The part-time equal part entertainment and absurdity

9

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept
Take the insanity of Saints Row to new heights in a new city

» Graphics
Explosions and environments look great, but character models could use some work

» Sound
Killing gangsters with lasers while listening to *The Karate Kid*'s "You're the Best" or *Rocky IV*'s "No Easy Way Out" is incredible

» Playability
Everything controls smoothly, regardless of whether you're in an on-foot gunfight or piloting the Warhawk-like VTOL

» Entertainment
Action-packed missions and frequent turns for the ridiculous keep the humor and entertainment coming

» Replay Value
Moderately High



gamefanformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Volition, Inc. **Release** November 15 **ESRB** M





When the teaser trailer for the first Saints Row debuted during a console reveal for the Xbox 360, gamers saw what appeared to be a derivative open-world crime game. In the span of two sequels, we've gone from the drive-by shooting of that trailer to areas ripped off from *Tron* and weapons like bottled farts and Mega Man-like arm cannons. With Saints Row: The Third, Volition has succeeded in making one of the most unpredictable and insane experiences in recent gaming memory. I was expecting something crazy, but was still surprised by the sheer amount of absurdist humor packed into this over-the-top sequel.

Saints Row: The Third's humor is low-brow yet self-aware, featuring the silliness of the Naked Gun movies with the adult edge of *South Park*. You won't find much in the way of social commentary here, but it's hard not to laugh when you're running around pantless and dishing out tornado DDTs to passersby. Volition's love of groin shots would make *America's Funniest Home Videos* blush, with dedicated (and very specifically targeted) melee animations for each weapon. Making a funny visual even better is the deep character customization feature, which allowed me to cause mayhem as Larry David, Pantless Colossus, Ric Flair, and GI's own Joe Juba.

As much as the game made me laugh, it wouldn't deserve such high praise without solid gameplay at its core. It may be easy to get distracted by the nonsense occurring onscreen, but Saints Row: The Third is thrilling as an action game. Missions vary wildly, and they're almost all bombastic, popcorn-movie affairs. You'll start by airlifting a bank's vault out of a skyscraper, move on to a mid-air firefight, and wind up grappling with luchadores, escaping an S&M club on a rickshaw, piloting futuristic aircraft, and even participating in a text-based adventure before it's all said and done. If you think I'm spoiling the most wacky bullet points, don't worry – there are much crazier twists that I won't detail in this review.

Whereas the previous two games sectioned off missions based on which gang you were going after, this one features a cohesive narrative throughout. It's just one of the ways that this sequel feels like a more complete package than its predecessors. The economic side of things has expanded dramatically; buying up property in the new city of Steelport earns you a steady cash flow, and the myriad ways you can spend it is almost overwhelming. The massive upgrade system allows you to buy faster health regeneration, increased sprint, damage resistance, and the ability to call in vehicle and helicopter deliveries, among several dozen other options.

If you don't feel like granting yourself these permanent attribute upgrades, you can spend cash on new clothes, vehicle customization, or weapon upgrades. My standard pistol wasn't helping much in my takeover of Steelport, but it became a force to be reckoned with once it had explosive, electric bullets. As far as using your powered-up arsenal is concerned, the controls serve the gunplay well, and fans of open-world games will feel right at home with the shooting and driving mechanics.

When you're not taking part in one of the ambitious story missions, the series' trademark

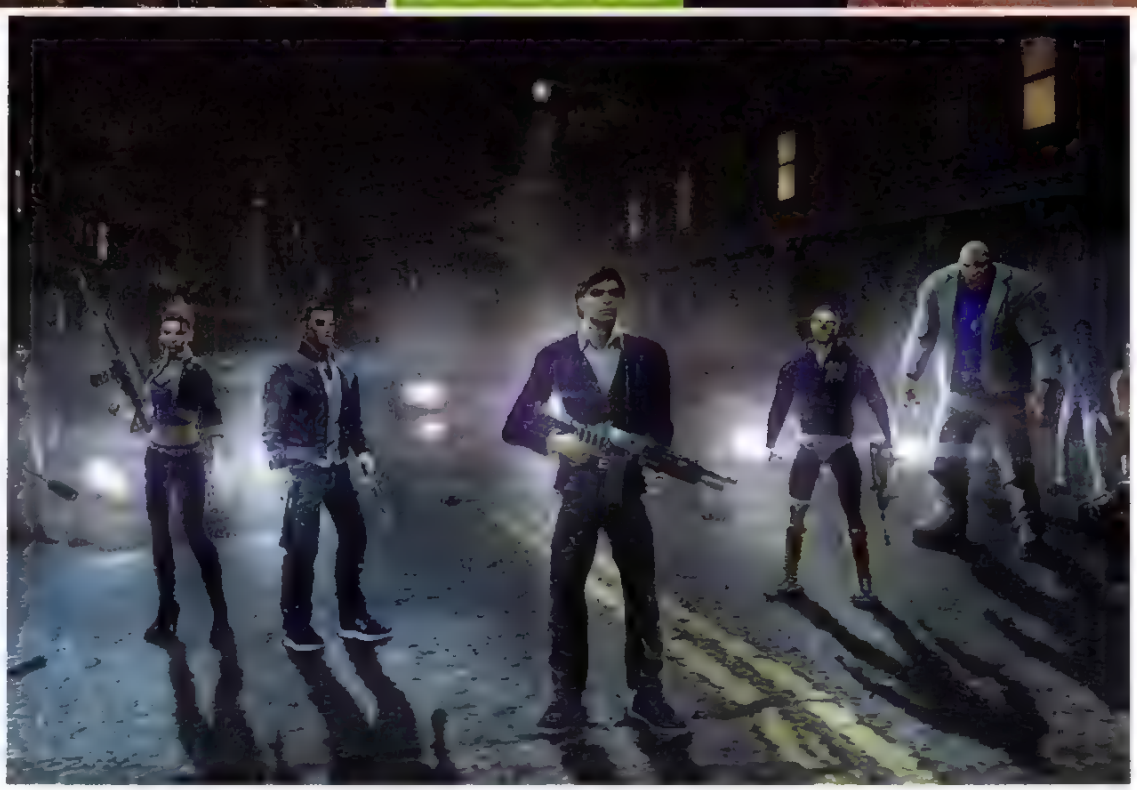






activities are scattered all over town. New distractions involve keeping a tiger satisfied while it sits in your passenger seat, riding a cyber bike through a computerized world, sniping enemies while rappelling down the side of a building, and participating in a televised deathmatch that feels like a cross between *The Running Man* and a Japanese game show. While most of the distractions are fun, some tedious activities like Trafficking, Snatch, and Escort make their return instead of more entertaining alternatives from Saints Row 2. That game's Fuzz, Septic Avenger, Fight Club, Demolition Derby, and Crowd Control activities seem like a natural fit for this sequel, but they're surprisingly absent.

Regardless of a few omitted favorites, Saints Row: The Third features no shortage of activities, side-quests, collectibles, and humorous distractions. Between them, the wealth of new upgrade options, co-op play, Whored mode (a Horde mode clone), and the explosive story missions, there's no shortage of content. It's also good to see Volition continue to make the series less buggy with each installment. Occasional glitches will rear their head as you cruise around the new city, but they're rarely more than cosmetic. Taking over Steelport as the 3rd Street Saints feels like a more focused effort than its predecessors' campaigns, and it'll keep you laughing throughout. » **Dan Ryckert**



Battlefield 3

DICE refines and improves the elite FPS franchise

9.5

PC

» **Concept**
Improve the long-running series with its best campaign to date and the fantastic Frostbite 2 engine

» **Graphics**
If your video card can support it, you won't find a better-looking FPS on the market

» **Sound**
A subtle score and unrivaled audio design complement the already-intense firefights

» **Playability**
DICE has been excelling at FPS control for years, and their experience shows more than ever

» **Entertainment**
Its multiplayer formula won't surprise fans, but Battlefield 3 refines an experience that was already among the best in the genre

» **Replay Value**
High



GAMEINFORMER GOLD

Style 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online PC, 24-Player PS3, Xbox 360) **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer DICE **Release** October 25 **ESRB** M

Modern first-person shooters have started to resemble big-budget Hollywood blockbusters in recent years, a trend that has received both praise and criticism from gaming audiences. Being shuttled from one explosive set piece moment to another can be thrilling, but when this formula is overused it feels you've boarded an on-rails Disneyland ride. While the Battlefield 3 campaign isn't devoid of this feeling, its multiplayer offers a much more natural (and rewarding) sense of large-scale action. With dozens of players battling across nine massive maps in tanks, jeeps, helicopters, jets, and on foot, multiplayer matches feel like a genuine war rather than a small-scale skirmish.

Whether you're playing through the tense campaign or spending countless hours in multiplayer, Battlefield 3 greatly benefits from the stunning Frostbite 2 engine. If your gaming computer is capable of supporting the highest settings, you're in for an aesthetic treat that tops everything else in the genre. Character animations are smooth and realistic, explosions have significant weight to them, and environments get torn apart in showers of concrete and debris. The stellar audio design matches the high quality bar of the graphics, featuring realistic sound effects, Hollywood-caliber voice acting, and a great soundtrack. Music doesn't blare throughout most of the game, but it's subtle and effective when it does complement the action.



Rather than delivering sweeping changes to the series' multiplayer format, DICE chose more subtle tweaks for Battlefield 3. As with Bad Company 2, players can choose from four classes, but the assault and medic classes are now merged (with the now-open fourth slot dedicated to the LMG-toting, ammo-dropping support class). I loved both classes in Bad Company 2, so the ability to throw medkits and revive teammates while blasting away with assault weaponry is ideal. In a move that should please snipers and potentially annoy sniping victims, the ability to go prone returns. It's as annoying as ever to get picked off by camping recon players, but the kill cam and scope glint should tip observant players off to their locations.

Rush, Team Deathmatch, and the squad variants are solid modes, but with the return of 64-player matches (on PC – see sidebar for console multiplayer details), Conquest is once again the star of the multiplayer show. In my time on the game's pre-release servers, I never







The PC version supports 64-player online matches which convey an unrivaled sense of scale.

encountered lag. Even in massive battles featuring dozens of players and vehicles competing over a single flag, the action proceeded without the slightest hiccup. The size of the maps, variety of vehicles, and overall scale of Conquest rounds make for some fantastic moments that couldn't be recreated if you tried. During a match on the Operation Firestorm map, I was taking out enemy tanks by performing sweeping runs with my jet. After the opposing team lost a couple of vehicles, they sent their own fighter into the sky to hunt me down. Once my plane took too much punishment, I ejected and parachuted down to a nearby rooftop. As my teammates battled for flag control a couple of stories below me, I pulled out a stinger, locked onto my airborne attacker, and took the plane down with a homing rocket. I watched it crash about 100 feet in front of me, then hopped down to join the battle for the flag. These moments make the experience.

All nine maps that ship with Battlefield 3 are fantastic regardless of mode, and unlike Bad Company 2, you can play each map in any mode right out of the gate. The petroleum refineries of Operation Firestorm and the creeks and grassy hills of Caspian Border are my favorites of the bunch, but the other maps maintain a level of quality that reaffirms DICE is unrivaled in multiplayer level design. Even with the series' history of quality, I was surprised by the scale of these battlefields. At one point during a Rush round on Damavand Peak, I found myself in the passenger seat while a pilot struggled to maintain control of the helicopter. Fearing a crash, I bailed. As I parachuted towards the ground, I thought I was about to land outside of the map's boundaries considering how far away it was, but the objectives shifted as I was in mid-air and revealed that I was already well on my way to the next M-Com station.

As exciting as the in-game action is, jumping into matches is a hassle. Forcing players to exit the game menu to the Battlelog website when they want to switch between modes seems unnecessary, and I would have preferred to chat, manage my party, check server lists, and look at my stats from inside the game. The only thing Battlelog adds to the experience is a few additional steps to get to the action. Forming a party is easy if your desired squad members are already on your friends list, but communicating isn't trouble-free. Standard multiplayer supports text chat, but you'll have to back out of the game if you want to communicate with a co-op partner who doesn't have a headset. No matter what mode you're in, you'll have to hold the left shift button to speak to your party. Considering this is the same button as sprint, you'll run when you don't want to and your teammates will be able to hear you any time you're scurrying to the next objective. While Battlelog does have its issues, the act of actually forming parties and getting them into your game is simple (as long as you don't mind backing out of the game when you want to invite a friend). If your buddy hops online while you're in the middle of a round of Conquest, you just need to back out to Battlelog and drag him from your Com Center (friends list) to your game. From there, they'll automatically be added to your squad if there's room available.

Most Battlefield fans spend the majority of their time in the rewarding multiplayer, but this entry also delivers the series' most ambitious single-player campaign to date. While players filled the shoes of the jokesters of B Company in the Bad Company campaigns, Battlefield 3 presents a dead-serious narrative about an imminent nuclear threat. You'll primarily play as Sgt. Blackburn, a marine who's being interrogated about missing warheads as the story plays out via flashbacks. As I progressed through the seven-hour campaign, I couldn't ignore the numerous elements directly pulled from the Call of Duty format. By the time the end credits roll, you'll have assumed the roles of several globetrotting characters, taken out ground targets from a circling aircraft, witnessed several dramatic slow-motion deaths, partaken in a tense sniping section with a fellow soldier, raced against the clock to stop a nuclear explosion, and sat through a scene clearly meant to shock players. While derivative, the campaign is consistently entertaining throughout. Tight gunplay, exciting set piece moments, and a more focused narrative than its primary competitor help to make this the best shooter campaign since Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare.

Battlefield fans hoping for the most polished entry in the series won't be disappointed by this massive sequel. Multiplayer maintains the high level of quality DICE is known for, and the campaign is the best in franchise history. Outside of the annoying Battlelog and a tacked-on, uninspired co-op mode consisting of six short standalone missions, the only downside to Battlefield 3 is the lack of substantial changes to the multiplayer formula. However, that shouldn't stop longtime fans and newcomers from enjoying one of the best FPS experiences in gaming. » **Dan Ryckert**

The Console Difference

Console Score – 9.25

Playing Battlefield 3 on consoles is mostly the same experience as the PC version, but it's not identical. The game looks gorgeous no matter what system you're playing on, but you'll notice more pop-in and framerate drops on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. The framerate tops out at 30, but occasional dips will occur if there is a lot of concentrated activity or several incoming vehicles at the same time. During an intense firefight on a bridge, I noticed a helicopter chugging along at a drastically reduced framerate at one point.

While the slight step down in terms of graphical quality might irk some, the only significant gameplay difference is the 24-player limit on consoles. These 24-player matches are great fun, but they don't have the impact that massive 64-player PC battles do. Maps are scaled down to accommodate this lower limit, so PC players will be playing on giant versions of maps that console players will never see. Even with the lower player count, I noticed occasional lag during console multiplayer bouts that I never ran into on PC. Console multiplayer may not operate on as big of a scale as the PC version, but at least it doesn't require you to deal with Battlelog every time you want to play the game or switch modes. Battlefield 3 is a fantastic game regardless of system, but the PC version has the edge on its console brothers.

Need for Speed: The Run

Exploring flyover country

7.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Participate in a cross-country race in a car and, once in a blue moon, on foot

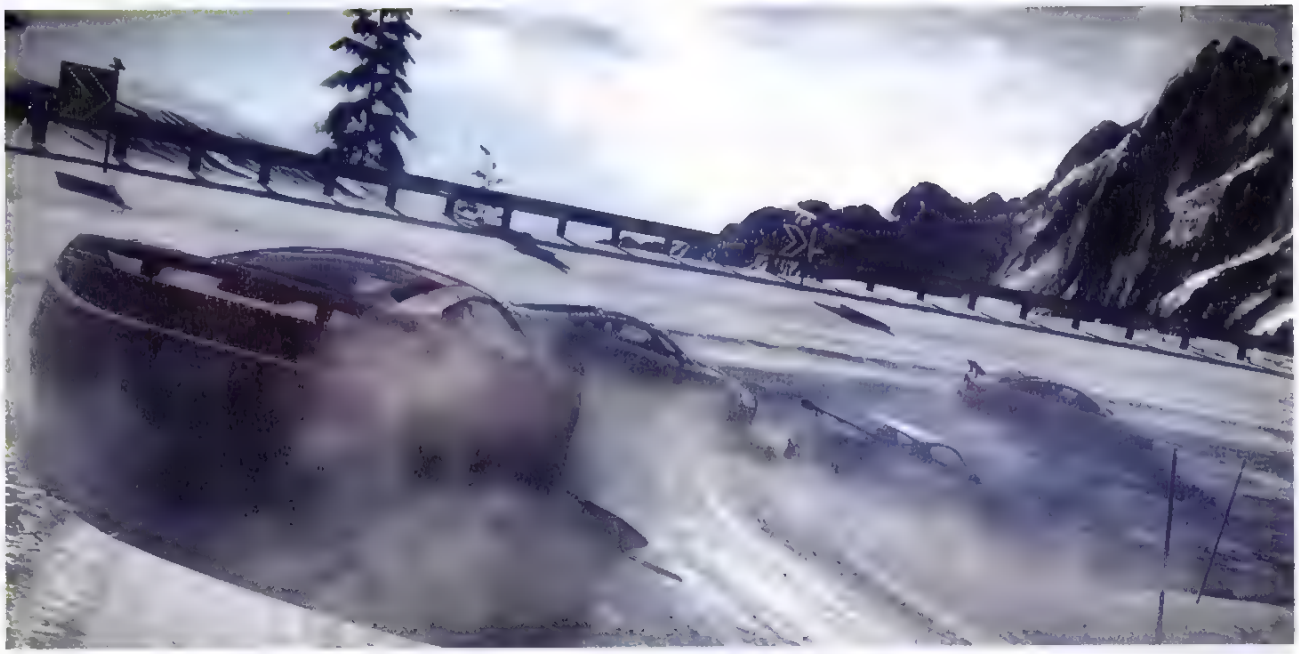
» Graphics
The landscapes are distinctive as you trek across the country, and the cutscenes look pretty good. Yes, the game uses Battlefield 3's Frostbite 2 engine, but it doesn't look as awesome as DICE's shooter

» Sound
The occasional licensed tracks nicely augment the original score, and as always, the police chatter keeps things exciting and tense

» Playability
Handling is arcadey, so you mainly just have to worry about executing the handbrake and nitrous at the right times

» Entertainment
The Run's basic racing is solid, but the highlights are too few and far between

» Replay Value
Moderate



Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Black Box **Release** November 15 **ESRB** T

The premise of Need for Speed: The Run is very intriguing. Races at breakneck speeds, out-of-the-car segments offering new experiences, and an over-arcing story to tie it all together could have created a breakthrough racing title that solved the genre's repetitive nature. Although The Run contains all of these constituent parts, it fails to execute or combine them in an engaging way. After I finished the game, I had raced across America, escaped the mob, and cheated death numerous times, but was left with relatively few postcards to remember the experience by.

My main problem with the game is that its cross-country trek contains too few highlights. The out-of-the-car moments can be counted on one hand, and when they finally do occur, the fact that they are little more than quick-time events dampens them as a novel gameplay experience in an otherwise foreign genre. The one standout, non-QTE sequence takes place in Chicago with protagonist Jack escaping from a crashed car before an oncoming train flattens



him. I liked it because I actually had some choice (or rather, the illusion of it) in how I freed myself. However, this is the only time being out of the car works well.

The racing itself isn't boring, but it's not novel enough in and of itself to make the game great – especially since it's not being bolstered by the on-foot segments. I will say this, however: The racing environments across America are well chosen. Whether it's the Nevada desert, the Rockies, cities like Chicago, or even middle America, the race tracks look great and are filled with their share of heart-stopping racing through oncoming traffic, past pursuing cops, and down perilous back-country roads. As fun as the racing is, I wish there were more crazy set-pieces, such as when you escape an avalanche or race through the New York subway system. Furthermore, I wanted more variety in the race types themselves, and the fact that the tracks (especially the urban ones) are linear beyond some shortcuts is unfortunate given that rival series Midnight Club has been doing branching races for years.

As much as the on-foot vignettes are a lost opportunity for The Run, I also feel like it drops the ball on the story. Fight Night Champion is a great example of a title that successfully placed a story and characters on top of a genre where it didn't normally belong. There is no depth, character interest, or story twists beyond The Run's stated premise, and I soon detached from it because of that.

The game also has an extensive Autolog tracking system to feed you race suggestions, a separate Challenge mode that lets you earn medals for a list of races, and a cool multiplayer playlist format that keeps the races, awards, and objectives coming one after the other. Need for Speed: The Run is by no stretch a bad game; it just fails to capitalize on its chances. San Francisco to New York is a long haul, and it's even longer when not enough happens in between. » Matthew Kato



The Lord of the Rings: War in the North

Losing the battle, losing the war

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing (3-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer Snowblind Studios **Release** November 1 **ESRB** M

5.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A Lord of the Rings-themed action/RPG from the developer of Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

» **Graphics**
The eagles' animations are impressive. Other than that, expect your average monsters, environments, and gore

» **Sound**
This sure is a soundtrack for an epic fantasy game

» **Playability**
An erratic camera complicates combat, and the targeting does a poor job of reading your intention

» **Entertainment**
It's repetitive, glitchy, and bland. Does that sound like your idea of fun?

» **Replay**
Moderately Low



Five years ago, I would have counted Snowblind Studios among my favorite RPG developers. Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance and Champions of Norrath demonstrated that Snowblind knew how to combine action, character progression, and loot into an irresistible formula. I still look back at those titles and wish that breed of gameplay had more time in the spotlight. While my love for action/RPGs and respect for the studio got me excited for War in the North, they are also what led to me being incredibly let down by this clumsy and unpolished adventure.

If you focus on the individual components, War in the North appears to be a recipe for success. Set in Tolkien's quintessential fantasy universe, this third-person action/RPG puts players in control of a wannabe Fellowship storming through familiar locations and hacking through goblins, orcs, and trolls. Once killed, these creatures drop plenty of loot and award experience that players allocate in skill trees, giving each character an array of unique passive and active abilities. When you consider all of those features plus local and online co-op, War in the North sounds great. The problem is that just *having* features isn't enough; they need to be well-implemented and fun. I could complain about lots of little things, but most of my issues are connected to one large problem: War in the North does not feel like a finished game.

Combat has traditional hack-and-slash mechanics, but is unsatisfying thanks to the encounter design. In the first part of the game, battles are hilariously easy since your companions can revive you easily and the enemies go down quickly. That's when things are at their best, because at least you and your companions can have some fun mowing down hordes of bad guys. Later, your foes have substantially more hit points, can interrupt your revival attempts, and they essentially stop reacting to any of your moves. They perform uninterruptable attacks as you lumberjack away at them like meat trees, never flinching or staggering under your assault.

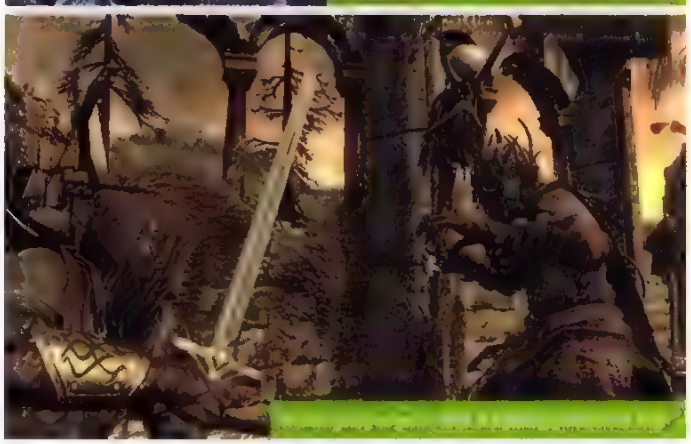
The escalating sense of power is one of the major draws in this genre, but it isn't the salvation it could be here. Your attacks do more damage as you level, but the enemies also get stronger, so you're just rising with the tide rather than getting more formidable. Ideally, the abilities you unlock for each character would help punctuate the tedium, but they don't. Firstly, the abilities in the skill tree seem randomly arrayed. For instance, the Champion (warrior) has an ability called War Cry, but upgrades for War Cry are scattered across all three of the main trees. Secondly, the powers themselves aren't inventive or exciting, and the mana bar governing them recharges slowly.

The sloppy mechanics and lack of innovation make War in the North feel like a licensed game that was rushed to market to coincide with a movie's release – except, in this case, there's no movie in theaters. It has the same stale objectives that define that breed of game, not to mention room after room padded out with practically identical encounters. You can tackle them with friends in co-op if you want, but even that has some kinks. The online functionality works fine, but if you want to play on the same couch in two-player split screen, you each need your own profile with its own data. That's fine if you're starting at the same time, but what if you're over at a friend's place and just want to play for a level or two? You're going to be a first-level load with lousy gear.

War in the North also has problems beyond its design. I encountered several glitches, though most were minor (like characters getting stuck on the environment or enemies not moving). However, one bug in the PS3 version near the end of the game made it impossible for me to progress. I couldn't restart the mission, I couldn't warp back to town, and (because the game autosaves to a single slot) I couldn't load an earlier level. Fortunately, I'm in a position as a reviewer where I can contact the developers and get new saves sent to me. Most consumers aren't so lucky, and would lose all of their progress if hit by the same bug.

I can only say one good thing about War in the North: It could have been awesome. The conceptual framework is solid, and with some extensive tuning and polish, it would be fun to play. Just thinking of War in the North reimagined as an old-school isometric adventure (à la Dark Alliance) gets me pumped up…but it's too late for that now. Snowblind Studios' record proves that it knows how to make good action/RPGs. I hope that happens again in the future. » **Joe Juba**





Spider-Man: Edge of Time

The great locked door caper

6.5

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» Concept
Two Spider-Men. Two time periods. More annoying locked doors than you can shake a web at

» Graphics
Time manipulation brings an array of beautiful effects and visuals that are difficult to follow. Character models look fantastic, but almost every area in the Alchemax complex looks the same

» Sound
If you want to hear two Spider-Men bicker and whine about everything for seven to eight hours, this is your game! On the other hand, the soundtrack is awesome and reminiscent of Star Wars

» Playability
The time-based powers make combat way too easy and remove the need to experiment with different combos and moves

» Entertainment
The story is a confusing journey through two time periods, and little joy comes from opening so many damn doors

» Replay Value
Moderately Low



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Beenox **Release** October 4 **ESRB** T

Spider-Man: Edge of Time's story plays out like a Stephen Hawking book – if Stephen Hawking was a comic book-addicted third grader. The terms "quantum causality," "Einstein-Rosen Bridge," "temporal paradox," "wormhole," and "timestorm" are thrown around at will with little regard for scientific fact, and are mostly used as explanations for incomprehensible plot points.

This tale starts out with an easily graspable hook. In the year 2099, an evil scientist named Walker Sloan figures out a way to alter history. Through his tinkering, he's turned his company Alchemax into a totalitarian powerhouse. The Spider-Man of this day, Miguel O'Hara, knows that this isn't the way that history originally played out. To save the future, he must revert the past to its original form. Now here's where things get a little weird. In this altered past, Peter Parker works for Alchemax (as opposed to the Daily Bugle). He's forced to submit his DNA to the company for...you know...reasons. In 2099, Miguel uses this DNA to create a chronal device that allows him to communicate directly with Peter. Think of it as a time phone...that runs on DNA strands...and can apparently only be used after Peter submits his DNA – rather than a day or a few years before bad things start happening. Working together across time, the Spider-Men must reverse the polarity of the chronal energy to right the events of the past and future. Chronal energy polarity, eh? This is starting to stink of a Q plot on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Spoiler: From what I could gather, this polarity shift was accomplished by throwing Doctor Octopus' mechanical tentacles into a wormhole. Science?

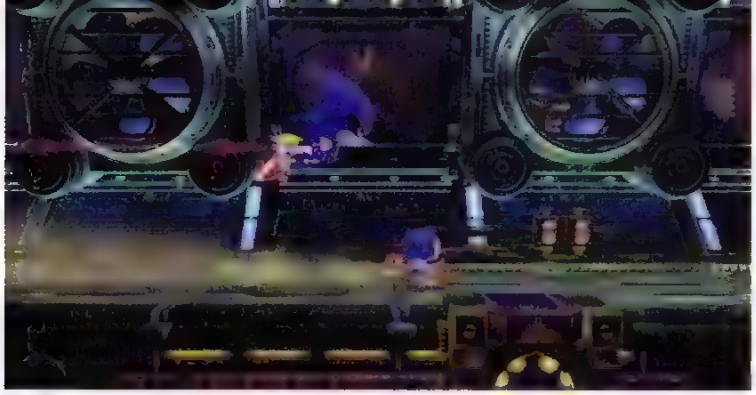
Getting to this point requires time-altering events. For instance, if Miguel runs into a dead end, Peter can alter the past (usually by punching bad guys or breaking devices) to open up a new path in the future. The way that this is telegraphed to the player is quite cool. While playing as Peter, a picture-in-picture view of Miguel appears in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. Once Peter succeeds in his mission, Miguel's screen expands to full-frame and control is seamlessly handed off to him. This system removes the boundaries of running through bookended levels and makes the game seem like one gigantic story-driven adventure.

No matter how much Peter changes in the past, he cannot help Miguel open locked doors. Given how frequently they are used, Activision should reprint this game's packaging with the bullet point: "Dozens of locked doors and keys to find!" Most of the missions feature a locked door or two or three. Some doors even require three keys to open. The video game cliché of everything happening in sets of three is abused to the point of absurdity. In one frustrating boss fight, Spidey must gather his foe's DNA three times to complete a strand. Science?

Edge of Time's combat mechanic is similar in design to Beenox's previous Spider-Man title, Shattered Dimensions', but is made hard to follow through the infusion of time-based powers. Miguel can phase through time, leaving an imprint of himself that enemies attack. Peter can speed up his movements to cover ground at a pace similar to Quicksilver's. When these powers are used frequently, which is a smart tactic, keeping track of Spidey's location is kind of like playing "Where's Waldo," especially given how many visual effects are tied to most frays. I mashed the attack buttons, used the phasing/speed powers whenever I could, and was able to rack up 100- and 200-hit combos frequently. Truth be told, having an unfair advantage over combat is kind of empowering, but when the end result is almost always getting a key so you can move on to the next combat area, there isn't much satisfaction tied to it. A fairly large list of combat upgrades allows individualized player styles, but none of them really seemed to give me a benefit over the phasing and speed.

The one Spider-Man trait that is rarely touched on is Spider-Man's web-swinging ability. Since this entire game takes place inside of Alchemax's facility (both in the present and future), most of the environments are enclosed spaces that make combat intimate and web-swinging an afterthought. Yes, the Spider-Men can still swing through these areas, but it's mostly only useful to shift quickly from one end of the room to the other. Only a few areas allow the player to gracefully swing over large expanses and the gameplay tied to these moments is fairly unremarkable.

All of this culminates in an experience that doesn't necessarily feel like it was tailored for Spider-Man. I applaud Beenox for trying something different with this iconic character, yet ultimately find myself thinking about how many locked doors I opened rather than the story, combat, or character-based moments. For me, the game just seemed to get worse as it went on and more frustrating as the same types of mission objectives were recycled. Shattered Dimensions was good fun. Edge of Time is a major step back from the formula that worked. » **Andrew Reiner**





Sonic Generations

A suffering hedgehog's life flashes before his eyes

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sonic Team **Release** November 1 **ESRB** E

6.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A whimsical trip down memory lane that ends in the gutter

» **Graphics**
Bright colors and sprawling landscapes make for one of the best-looking Sonic games

» **Sound**
The remixes of old tunes and ability to select your own soundtrack make this an aural joy

» **Playability**
The 2D platforming is a slight step up from Sonic Colors' floatiness, but running in a straight line while in 3D is difficult. Things fall apart when you have to complete a level quickly

» **Entertainment**
The first half of the game is a nostalgic treat, while the latter portions are a sobering reminder of Sonic's fall from glory

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

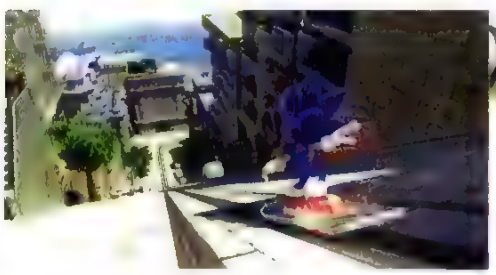
Sonic Generations aims to bridge the gap between old and new fans by revisiting stages throughout the series with both 2D and 3D gameplay. The result is a timeline that starts out strong and slowly deteriorates, serving as an apt history lesson for the struggling series.

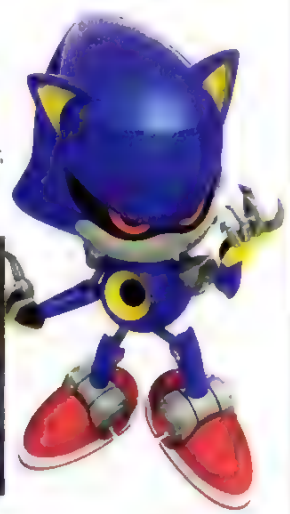
The quest begins with side-scrolling tributes to memorable Genesis-era stages as classic Sonic. These levels rekindled the magic of being a wide-eyed kid seeing Sonic's world for the first time. Platforming is slightly tighter than in Sonic 4, which makes landing precise jumps easier. Tearing through loop de loops in Green Hill and bouncing across clouds in Sky Sanctuary are among my favorite Sonic moments, and they translate perfectly. Unfortunately, the good times fade when Sonic begins cruising through 2D versions of levels from post-Dreamcast Sonic games. Traversing the burning ruins of Crisis City from the awful 2006 Sonic the Hedgehog reboot is an exercise in frustration packed with unfair drop-offs and annoying gales.

Playing as modern 3D Sonic presents the same steady drop in fun. Speeding across double helix pipes and dodging chemical geysers in Chemical Plant makes for some of the best 3D Sonic Adventure-style action the series has seen, but things go south when you break into the last-gen titles. Sonic Unleashed and Sonic Heroes didn't thrill me, and revisiting reworked versions only serves to remind me of how uninspired they are. Legacy issues, like wonky platforming and poorly communicated pitfalls, plague these later levels.

The last half of the game serves only to remind you of how far the series has fallen from its original form. I felt smothered by Sonic Team's insistence on shoehorning recent Sonic games, no matter how awful, into the 20-year timeline. Why would Sega pass up full level tributes to Sonic 3 or Sonic CD in favor of a remixed version of a stage from Sonic Colors, which released only a year ago?

At the end of the game, old and new Sonic part ways. As they do, modern Sonic says to his retro doppelganger, "Hey Sonic, enjoy your future, it's going to be great!" If he only knew. » **Tim Turi**





Disney Universe

Not an E ticket ride

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios **Developer** Disney Interactive Studios **Release** October 25 **ESRB** E10+

6.5

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**
Let families roam around a virtual theme park, defeating glitches and saving the day

» **Graphics**
Cuter than a railroad car full of puppies

» **Sound**
Squeals and grunts are layered atop generic-sounding riffs

» **Playability**
The gameplay is basic enough for a child to grasp, with a similar level of depth

» **Entertainment**
You'll see nearly everything that Disney Universe has to offer in an hour or so, though the game drags on much longer

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Playing through Disney Universe reminded me of Disneyland's own It's a Small World ride. My initial exclamations of "aww" gave way to "AHH!" after enduring the same cutie-pie shtick on repeat. Even though the lyrics may change slightly, it's the same cloying tune over and over and over again.

In the game's world, Disney Universe is a virtualized version of a Disney theme park, giving players a chance to explore familiar settings and visit with friendly faces from some of the company's biggest franchises. Before the friendly computer guide can finish with the introductory tour, the game inside the game is infected by a cybervillain named HEX. The formerly idyllic world is now home to nefarious AI villains. It's the player's job to set things straight by beating the ever-loving bits out of the bad guys.

When it was first revealed at E3, Disney Universe drew comparisons to LittleBigPlanet. While it may share a similar aesthetic if you squint really hard, it has more in common with Traveller's Tales series of LEGO games. At first, there's a lot to like. The characters are delightfully cute, with dozens of different familiar costumes. The settings incorporate a who's who of classic Disney properties. The Lion King! Aladdin! Pirates of the Caribbean. Wall-E? Eh, close enough. The gameplay is pretty basic stuff, but it has to get better. Right?

Unfortunately, what you see is largely what you get. Each of the different worlds offers obvious cosmetic differences, but the overarching gameplay is largely unchanged between them. Sure, a "key" may take the form of a lamp or a sword or a sword swallower (don't ask), but the functionality is identical. Punch the bad guys, kill the bad guys, unlock the latest barrier, move forward a little bit. The few gameplay variations (arcade games within a game about a game!) are cute, but they're about as interesting in the long run as a 30-second Mario Party minigame. While I'm all for a little hand-holding, Disney Universe takes helping the player to ridiculous extremes. Blue arrows point players to their next immediate objective, reducing what puzzles there are to simple fetch quests.

Disney Universe gets more interesting when you grab three friends (or kids) and play together, but so does just about everything. There's a nice little competitive element in the game, and players can sabotage their friends' efforts by hoarding power-ups and triggering traps. That said, the game is so shallow and repetitive that only the most easily amused will be able to slog their way through to the end credits, with or without companionship. » **Jeff Cork**



Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure

A charming game, a diabolical business model

8

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**
Take Spyro and a host of Skylanders heroes on a quest that resembles a kid-oriented Diablo with some light puzzle solving and action sequences

» **Graphics**
It's not the most ambitious game, but Skylanders' colorful graphics will bring you back to the PSone/N64 era

» **Sound**
An amazing score that could hold its own against many CG animated films

» **Playability**
The basic gameplay is solid, with varied play styles and interesting combat upgrades for each character

» **Entertainment**
A few minor quibbles aside, I had a blast playing Skylanders. Still, you can't help but feel like Toys for Bob has constructed this game to manipulate you into buying more figurines

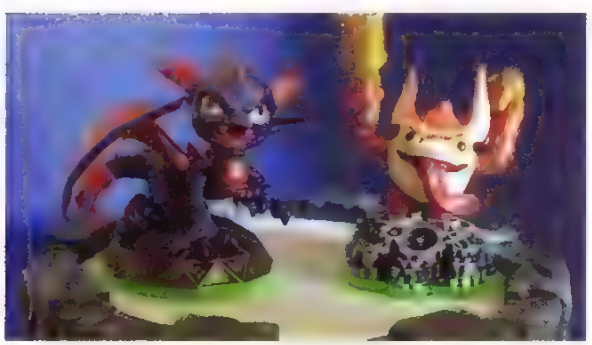
» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



Style 1 or 2-Player Action/RPG Publisher Activision Developer Toys for Bob (Wii), XPEC (PS3, 360) Release October 16 ESRB E

Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure is an odd title. It's the most interesting entry in the Spyro universe since creator Insomniac parted ways with its cute purple dragon. However, it's not what you expect. This is not a platformer – there's not even a jump button. Instead, it's a Diablo-style action/RPG loot-fest aimed at the younger set, augmented by an admittedly clever interface that allows you to swap in small figurines that become in-game characters through the use of a lighted base connected to your console.

While this technology is largely the world's most elaborate character select interface, it also has a bit of magic to it – especially when you realize that all your character's attributes, upgrades, gold, and items are saved to an RF chip in the figure. This makes it easy to bring your best Skylander over to a friend's house for drop-in, drop-out co-op play. It's a charming, fresh take on the action/RPG that kept me rapt for well over 20 hours. However, under the cute exterior lies a business model that's nothing short of diabolical.



Let's start with the good part. An art exists in constructing a game that hooks players into the endless quest for more gold, items, and characters and upgrades. Skylanders does this perfectly, in a way that is accessible to kids but still appealing to older gamers. As you change between the over 30 Skylander characters available (for purchase – more on that later), you'll find that each has its own strengths, weakness, and unique upgrade paths. From Stump Smash's melee might to Drobot's ranged lasers and sharp flying gears, nearly every character has a use throughout the course of the 20-plus hour adventure. The basic controls work well, and the Wii version even uses minimal motion control elements to good effect. Swinging the Wii remote to emulate smashing rocks with a hammer is responsive and fun, but is nothing ground-breaking. A wide range of enemies exists, and each level delivers new tricks, puzzles, and even brief action sequences that recall Spryo's platforming roots.

It's worth noting that, while his name is in the title, Spryo is reduced to a bit player in his own game. You can switch out figurines at any time, meaning that no one character is central to the tale at hand. The story itself – though apparently written by *Toy Story* scribes Joel Cohen and Alec Sokolov – is generally just old-school boilerplate. A dark lord named Kaos is unleashing "darkness" on the Skylanders' world and it's your job to stop him…sound familiar?

So what's the catch? If you want to see everything this game has to offer, you're going to pay some extra cash. The base pack ($70) comes with three Skylanders, the portal base, and the disc. However, there are eight elemental types of Skylanders. Since certain areas are accessible only to certain elemental types, you need one of each to see everything on the disc. Those sell for $8 a pop, or $20 for a three-pack. There's also DLC-style content like a pirate ship that opens up a new level in the hub world for another $20 (though it does come packed with another character figure and some bonus items).

Essentially, this amounts to microtransactions via small toys. Each Skylander you own is another life, and at seemingly every turn the game encourages you to buy more. When you find Soul Coins (which open up a character's highest upgrade combat move), a slick preview video runs, showcasing the skill for a character more often than not you don't already have. This encourages little Johnny to beg his parents to take him to his local store to pick up the character for which he already has a special power.

But that's not all. Activision provided 12 Skylanders for my playthrough, and I needed every single one in the grueling last boss battle (which I didn't even beat until Adam joined me for the excellent co-op). I'm not opposed to allowing players to buy added value, but this already expensive $70 title basically requires another $30 investment just to unlock everything in the base game. It's a shame.

Armed with a nice roster of characters, Skylanders is an engrossing experience. Outside of an odd difficulty spike at the end and a few less-than-polished moments, the game hits its target. If I were a kid, I have no doubt I'd be saving my pennies to buy more Skylanders. However, as an adult, it's hard not to feel manipulated. » **Matt Helgeson**



The Sims 3: Pets

Starting from scratch

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer The Sims Studio **Release** October 18 **ESRB** T

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Give your sims pets…again. At least you can control them this time

» **Graphics**
I encountered plenty of slowdown and texture popping, but the level of detail on the pets is impressive

» **Sound**
The extra "meows" and "woofs" mix right in with the classic Sims-style soundtrack

» **Playability**
The controls work fine, though they are cumbersome compared to the PC interface (especially the camera)

» **Entertainment**
If you have an unconditional love of animals – no matter where they pee or what games they appear in – then you'll have fun

» **Replay**
Moderately Low

One of the primary appeals of Sims expansion packs is that their effects are cumulative. When you buy a new add-on, the world of your sims grows a little bit and you have access to the full spectrum of items and features. That's how the series has worked on PC for years, but on PS3 and 360, Pets isn't an expansion. It's a standalone game. That's good news for people who haven't played The Sims 3 on console yet, but terrible news for those who have. The Sims 3 Pets doesn't work with your previous Sims 3 saves, so you aren't just adding pets to the lives of your sims. You're starting over.

If you're fine with a fresh start, you'll find that pets adds more powers and challenges, many centered on the four-legged inhabitants of the world. While that gives you a few new activities to explore, the real draw of this installment is being able to create and control your own cats and dogs. The attention to detail is impressive; an array of breeds and customization options will satisfy animal lovers, allowing them to craft an army of adorable pets. Once you've created them, the pets join your sims as full-fledged members of the household.

If you're more interested in new gameplay than creating a realistic replica of your beloved family pet, don't get your hopes up. The cats and dogs aren't as complex as regular sims, and don't offer the same kind of engaging options. Even though they have their own traits and wishes to fulfill, pets only have one skill to advance (digging for dogs, hunting for cats), and the ways they interact with each other and with people is pared down.

Even though the pet-related content didn't blow me away, the saving grace of The Sims 3: Pets is that the game underneath it is still solid. All of the fun of The Sims 3 is still here. You don't have to create a pet if you don't want to; you can just make regular losers and guide them through a life filled with the humor and freedom that has defined the series.

For gamers who just want a chance to make their own pretty kitty and then watch it scratch up the furniture, The Sims 3 Pets delivers. If you want a Sims experience that builds on previous installments, incorporates your progress from The Sims 3, and actually makes your simulated world more interesting…well, better luck next time. » **Joe Juba**



The Edge

The Xbox 360 version supports Kinect by allowing voice commands, but they are largely useless and often annoying. You can only issue certain commands by voice, and when you do, you don't have any control over the specifics. For instance, if you're controlling a cat and you say, "Go to the bathroom," you don't get any input on where the business goes down. The cat might pee in its litter box, outside on the grass, or inside on the carpet. The voice detection works fine, but I preferred to avoid the commands altogether



Rocksmith

Decent game, remarkable feat of tech

gamerinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Rhythm/Music
Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft
Release October 18 **ESRB** T

8.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Learn to play guitar with an incredibly sophisticated learning system that masquerades as a game

» **Graphics**
Onscreen indicators are clear and well-designed, but the actual game graphics are minimal

» **Sound**
A surprising mix of music offers something for everyone, plus your console becomes a fully functional amp

» **Playability**
There's no magic bullet to learn a musical instrument, but Rocksmith manages some consistent entertainment as you learn the ropes

» **Entertainment**
The best video game option available for learning to play guitar, even if it's not as fun as other music games

» **Replay Value**
High

Rocksmith teaches you to play guitar, and it lets you use any guitar with a pickup to do it. The game is an impressive feat in music education wrapped up in the trappings of a game. While several other franchises will give you a more enjoyable party game, more robust unlockables, and flashier graphics, no other video game title offers such an impressive suite of tools to get you playing an honest-to-goodness musical instrument.

The technology on display is remarkable. Plug your own guitar into the game console using a cord that comes with the game. Start playing. It's as simple as that. A simple-to-use in-game tuner helps you keep things sounding right. Songs automatically adjust the output sound to match the tone of the original guitar part, and you hear the notes you play as part of the music. There's even an amp mode in which you can unlock your own effects to play freely to your heart's content.

Rocksmith's learning system is squarely targeted at novices, introducing the fundamentals of finger placement and chords while slowly layering in more targeted tricks like palm muting and harmonics. At any time, the game will recommend one of several new tasks you should try next, but you're free to branch out and play whatever you like. Technique exercises are prefaced by concise videos describing the task, and the subsequent practice sessions always nail home a focused lesson. For variety, there are also some cute unlockable arcade-style minigames.

The core experience of playing is built around playing songs through an intuitive tab-style interface. Song rehearsals start you out at the bare minimum, often playing a single note every few seconds. That's where the interactive element kicks in – dynamic difficulty alters the song as you play, adding in new notes and chords as you master previous ones until you're playing the full arrangement.

That same dynamic difficulty will prove frustrating for more experienced players, since there's no way to manually boost the challenge. I also can't praise the bare-bones presentation, with its boring UI and constant loading. Finally, for those with HDTVs, the specter of music game audio latency continues to rear its ugly head.

Those caveats aside, Rocksmith surprised me with its depth and usability. The eclectic song catalog stretches from The Rolling Stones and Nirvana to Radiohead and The Pixies, and on through Sigur Rós and Muse – around 50 songs in all. Plus, there's so much to explore; many songs even have multiple arrangements to learn, representing different lead and rhythm parts.

Is Rocksmith always a thrill a minute? No. However, few recent games offer so novel an experience as playing a guitar part, and hearing the notes you play flow out of your TV as part of a great rock song. It's the added incentive a lot of potential musicians might need to put in the time it takes to excel. » **Matt Miller**

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon

A new way to fly

8.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Take Ace Combat, set it in the real world, and make it feel more cinematic and exciting

» Graphics
Everything looks great until you get really close to the ground. Of course by that point you probably have bigger things to worry about

» Sound
Music switches back and forth between exciting orchestration and passable rock music. Sound design effectively delivers the feeling of airplanes exploding in the sky

» Playability
It feels different from past Ace Combats, but in a good way that strips out some of the frustrations

» Entertainment
Dog Fight Mode changes the game rather drastically, but it makes the combat more interesting and intense

» Replay Value
Moderate



Style 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Namco Bandai **Developer** Namco Bandai **Release** October 11 **ESRB** T

Assault Horizon feels a little different from previous entries in the Ace Combat series. It's not wildly different. It hasn't suddenly changed genres and turned into a turn-based RPG, but it is different enough where there is a slight possibility that long time fans may be turned off. Possible new fans though, are welcome with wide open arms.

The biggest change in Assault Horizon is the Dog Fight Mode, or DFM for short. DFM is entered by tailing your opponent closely for a certain period of time until a green circle appears over your combatant. After you press the shoulder buttons, you are locked into DFM. The camera pulls up tight behind your ship and control over the jet becomes limited, but that's a good thing. The broad controls are left to the computer, meaning you don't have to perform the chase. All you have to do is get your reticles aligned to blow up some flying villains. The camera shakes and shifts depending on what weapon you're using, and it adds a tangible feeling of intensity to every battle. Instead of simply chasing green triangle markers around hoping your bullets and missiles land, you are now in the middle of an intense, visually pleasing airship battle. Once you've taken out your target, the camera jumps to the wreckage allowing you to enjoy your handiwork.

Camera movement is a big part of Assault Horizon. Along with the visual movements employed in DFM, you will also take control of the camera from time to time during cutscenes, and have your attention diverted with the press of a button in order to focus on important happenings. The camera is constantly moving in interesting ways and it adds a level of seriousness to a story that doesn't stray too far from the clichés of video game wartime storytelling. Allegiances are broken, surprise twists pop up, and there are at least three massive explosions witnessed close range from the first-person perspective. It's nothing we haven't seen in a Call of Duty, but it is enough to make you move onto the next level to see what is going to happen.

Initially, there seemed to be a strong focus on the characters of Assault Horizon, starting with what appeared to be a very personal story of the lead pilot. As the game moves forward though, much of that is lost in favor, explosions on top of explosions.

Along with the standard jet, you'll also be controlling combat helicopters and the door guns of gunships. The jets are easily the most fun, but the additional vehicles mix up the action well. The gunship levels are straightforward: Look through your nightvision goggles and take aim at the evildoers. The combat helicopter adds more fun as you hover around blowing up everything in sight doing cartwheels to avoid rockets. None of the vehicles feel particularly realistic, but it's in all in favor of a more enjoyable and more cinematic experience.

Multiplayer consists of a few different modes and the option to play through missions cooperatively. The capital conquest and domination modes require teamwork and cooperative planning. The former has players focusing on specific targets to ultimately open up a bombing run on your opponent's base, while the latter is the familiar mode of capturing and holding specific color-coded areas. The most fun is found in the simple deathmatch mode. Jumping in and out of DFM with real opponents to raise your kill count is a lot of fun. As you progress through multiplayer you will unlock assorted ships, skills, and ship colors to help set you apart during future online sky battles.

The cooperative mode allows for two to three players to take on slightly adjusted versions of the missions from single player. The enemies are harder to take down in co-op mode, and you can do fancy things like coordinate DFM runs on single enemies to totally eliminate their chances of survival. It's a lot of fun working together to take out a single enemy, or to even see your buddy annihilate an enemy pilot from close up. You will often find yourself flying through the wreckage of an enemy that you had the pleasure of watching your partner take out.

DFM can be very jarring at first as it whips and shakes the camera in disorienting ways, but once you've gotten a handle on the perspective it becomes hugely rewarding to fight with it. You'll be tailing enemy planes through crowded cities spraying them with bullets and missiles until they explode in slow motion, emptying oil and debris all over your windshield. You may even see an enemy pilot or two flying through the air after they've ejected from what's left of their aircraft. Ace Combat fans might not like the new mode, but give it a bit of time, and you will likely come around. If you've been looking for an entryway into the flight combat genre, this is a great place to start. If you're already a fan, Assault Horizon has something a little bit different to offer you that you can definitely appreciate. » **Kyle Hilliard**





Payday: The Heist

Crime shooter delivers tense, challenging co-op shooting

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
Publisher Sony Online Entertainment
Developer OverKill **Release** October 20 **ESRB** M

8

PC

On PC where it belongs, Payday: The Heist mostly lives up to its lofty potential. Those moments and sessions where everything is working together as intended are some of the best times I've had with a shooter this year. A lackluster backend and some minor issues around the edges keep it from greatness, but if you have any friends you can count on to have your back in a frantic firefight, this is a worthy investment.

Payday is basically a modern crime caper version of Left 4 Dead. The six heists are each half-hour or so affairs that shuffle their objectives and threats around each playthrough, but always challenge your four-person team to work together and accomplish a series of goals en route to pulling off some crazy stunt like cutting a room out of a building and flying it off on a helicopter.

The gunplay is limited in scope to your basic rifle/shotgun/pistol paradigm, but the execution is tight and works well in the combat spaces you'll find yourself in. The real meat of Payday isn't in killing cops by the truckload, though. Covering all the approaches while waves of enemies batter you relentlessly is the most basic of strategies. Layered on top of that are trying to keep someone on overwatch to counter-snipe and take out enemies behind cover, managing your ammo supplies, and adapting to any curveballs law enforcement throws your way.

Basic cops are hardly any threat. Armored S.W.A.T. officers are more problematic. Snipers can ruin your day in a hurry. Smoke grenades make defending your objectives or advancing far more difficult. Riot shielded cops need to be flanked. Bulldozers shrug off dozens of bullets as they overrun your defenses. Even on normal difficulty, combat is constantly shifting gears to keep you on your toes. Most heists have great mixes of objectives that keep things fresh, flipping rapidly between offense and defense. It seems like there are always five things for the four of you to do, and maintaining that edge-of-your-seat tension is what Payday does best.

Every aspect of the game outside that core mission is some combination of mediocre, non-existent, or terrible. The audio is awful, with groan-worthy voiceovers and weak firearms. The visuals are competent at best. Forget about matchmaking; it's back to rolling the dice with browsing random lobbies to find a decent game. A simple progression system gives a moderate hook to keep you playing after you've completed all six heists, but I wouldn't give it a second thought if the gameplay wasn't enough to convince me to stick around on its own.

Payday obviously comes with some caveats, but it's a great game when everything goes right. Just don't bother with it on PS3 (see sidebar, or the full review of that version online at gameinformer.com), or single-player. I haven't seen AI this useless in years; Payday is basically unplayable without at least two humans at the controls. » **Adam Biessener**

» **Concept**
Team up with three other human robbers (or AI, if you hate yourself and want to know true misery) to pull off six cinematic heists

» **Graphics**
This looks decidedly last-gen at times, but picking out enemies and critical objects against the environment is almost never a problem

» **Sound**
Guns have no weight to their effects, and the voiceovers are terrible

» **Playability**
No problems on this platform

» **Entertainment**
This is an unmitigated disaster as a single-player game and some matchmaking would have been nice, but these epic heists are a unique thrill if you can round up a few decent co-op buddies

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

The Console Difference

PS3 – 6.5

Payday is also available on PlayStation Network, but don't waste your time. The game makes no allowances for playing on a gamepad and doesn't support mouse/keyboard control. The reason Halo blew away our conceptions of console FPS back in the day is because it was the first game built specifically around the limitations of analog stick control, and going back to the bad old days of right-stick whack-a-mole with limited ammo and no aim assist sucks in so many ways – especially on an up-tempo, difficult, teamwork oriented, skill based shooter.

Crysis

The porting of a PC legend

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Crytek **Release** October 5 **ESRB** M

8.25

PS3 • 360

When Crysis debuted on PC in 2007, the amazing water effects, long draw distance, and dense forests were a sight to behold, but my lasting memory of the game centers on its wide-open approach to combat. Four years later, console gamers finally get to see what all the fuss is about (minus the forgettable multiplayer mode you wouldn't want to play anyway).

Players assume the role of Nomad, a member of a Delta Force squad sent to a remote island off the coast of North Korea to investigate a distress signal from a team of archaeologists who uncovered a mysterious alien technology buried deep underground. The North Koreans want in on the action, so Nomad shoots and sneaks his way through the KPA on his way to facing the extraterrestrial threat. Thanks to the enhanced speed, strength, armor, and cloaking abilities of his nanosuit, Nomad has the upper hand on the battlefield. If you want a challenge, kick the difficulty up a notch because the enemies on the default settings are so dumb that an entire squad of North Koreans couldn't find me when I parked my jeep in a bush and started raining down MG fire upon them.

The main attraction of Crysis is the freedom developer Crytek gives you to experiment with tactical approaches. The large sandbox world offers equal opportunity to snipe enemies from afar, drive a jeep into an enemy base with guns blazing, or don the invisibility cloak and methodically pick off enemies one by one. As with Crysis 2, the streamlined nanosuit controls are deftly mapped to the gamepad, which is a step up from the clunky radial menu of the PC version.

While the wide-open sandbox gameplay and nanosuit powers survived the transition, the breathtaking graphical fidelity is lost in translation. The port still looks good in comparison to a lot of contemporary console games, but many of the impressive technological advancements are absent. The draw distance took a major hit in the conversion, the lack of anti-aliasing is extremely noticeable in dense environments, pop-up is common, and the drab nighttime sequences are a far cry from the stunning moonlit landscapes of the original. If you never saw the PC game in action, though, it's a non-issue.

Several bugs plague this port as well. I experienced numerous audio issues, weapons sometimes locked up when switching to new ones, and my ammo counter wouldn't update even though I picked up new bullets. Thankfully these occurrences were infrequent enough that they didn't detract from the solid core gunplay.

The noticeable downgrade in graphical fidelity and occasional bugs aside, the console port of Crysis is still a blast to play. If you're tired of corridor shooters and are looking for a little more freedom on the battlefield, this is a worthwhile download. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Concept**
Bring the PC juggernaut to consoles on the heels of the successful Crysis 2

» **Graphics**
Poor draw distance, frequent pop-up, and a lack of anti-aliasing ensure that no one will mistake this modest port for the PC original

» **Sound**
Sound bugs and poor transitions between environmental effects mar the experience

» **Playability**
The controls move effortlessly onto the gamepad

» **Entertainment**
This port may not look or sound like the highly regarded PC version, but the sandbox firefights hold up well

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception

Naughty Dog's epic conclusion to Drake's PS3 adventures

9.5

PS3

» Concept
Naughty Dog returns to put a cap on the cinematic adventures of Nathan Drake, Sully, Elena, and the rest of the gang

» Graphics
From a technical perspective, Uncharted 3 is stunning. But what I really appreciate is the game's vivid colors, expert cinematography, and lush scenery

» Sound
The masterful score lends drama to a story portrayed by the best ensemble cast of voice actors in gaming history

» Playability
While the game is a joy, shooting mechanics have never been Uncharted's strong suit, and the controls feel too jumpy at times. Also, a couple of segments are just plain messy and frustrating

» Entertainment
This is big-budget, triple-A game development at its finest. It's an adventure packed with thrills and a lot of genuine emotion

» Replay Value
Moderately High



gamefan GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment America
Developer Naughty Dog **Release** November 1 **ESRB** E

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves was one of my favorite games of this generation. Taking a cast of indelible characters through a thrilling adventure packed with jaw-dropping set pieces, it was a masterwork of video games as pure entertainment. Sure, BioShock might have had more on its mind, but with Uncharted 2 Naughty Dog delivered a perfect piece of pop fun.

Uncharted 2 raised the stakes for this franchise, setting an almost impossibly high bar for its successor to live up to. I'm happy to report that it does not disappoint

As expected, the game takes off like a runaway train – though this time we find Drake not dangling from a wrecked train car but fighting a cast of London thugs pulled straight from a Guy Ritchie film. It's here we first meet Katherine Marlowe, a cunning English villainess who quickly becomes Drake's most memorable antagonist. The plot device this time around involves an ancient 16th century artifact that has ties to a lost chapter in the life of Sir Francis Drake, whom Nathan claims to be descended from. As usual, Drake's quest takes him across the globe, from France to Syria, while he untangles an increasingly complex conspiracy that involves secret organizations, occult powers, and even Queen Elizabeth.

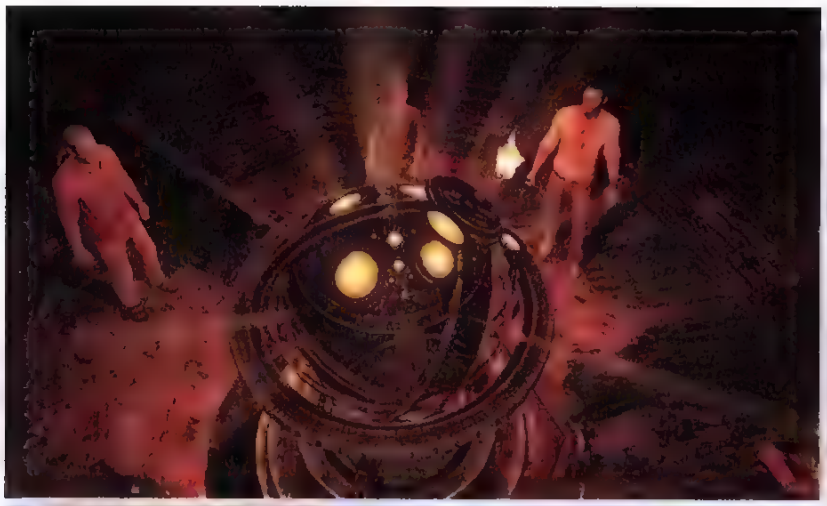
However, the real story at hand is a more human one. Uncharted 3 is really a game about relationships between people. While the on-again off-again romance between Drake and Elena Fisher still resonates, the focus of the game is on Nathan's longest and most complex relationship: his long, fraught partnership with his father figure Victor "Sully" Sullivan. The two have been through a lot, and longtime fans will be rapt at seeing the origins of their friendship. By the end of the game, you'll feel even closer to Drake and Sully.

While the plot provides an emotional element to the experience, Uncharted 3 also delivers several summer blockbusters worth of frenetic action. No one does set piece moments like Naughty Dog. From fleeing swarms of poisonous spiders to assaulting a military convoy on horseback, this game has half a dozen sequences that would be the highlight of most games. The already stunning visuals have been upgraded once again, making for a title that – against all odds – looks even better than its predecessor.

While I don't think anyone doubts Naughty Dog's ability to deliver high-octane thrills, gameplay is still the most important part of any game. On this front, Uncharted 3 makes some significant advancements – and a few missteps. Melee combat is vastly improved. I'd always avoided using my fists in past games, but new stealth attacks and a tighter combat system made hand-to-hand combat one of my favorite parts. The solid platforming mechanics also



This horseback sequence is one of the game's most thrilling






benefit from some subtle refinements. Finally, I was impressed by the puzzle design, which I think is the best in the series to date.

However, the gunplay – never this series' strong suit – still feels like it's taken a small step back. This is mostly due to the basic character movement. Naughty Dog has added some new animations to Drake's run, which add an unnecessarily convoluted jumpy quality to running and gunning (this feeling was confirmed when I pulled out Uncharted 2 to test my opinion). Interestingly, this is not a problem in the multiplayer, where the toned-down animations allow you to move in and out of cover and shoot more accurately.

Also of note are a couple of levels that feel somewhat poorly designed and messy – particularly a battle that takes place in a graveyard of ruined ships. In this segment, you're beset on all sides by pirates and are forced to swim for your life. If the swimming were better, this might not be a problem, but I found it downright frustrating. Given how much Uncharted 3 offers the player, these are minor quibbles. If anything, Naughty Dog's expert craftsmanship makes these small flaws stick out more than they would in most games.

Naughty Dog also continues its commitment to multiplayer. Co-op returns with a Horde-style survival mode called Co-Op Arena and more elaborate, objective-based missions. Competitive offers the usual deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture the flag modes (here called Plunder), as well as a more interesting Objective mode. A new "buddy" system pairs you with another player, giving you bonuses for working together. While I don't think the base mechanics are solid enough to rival the best first-person shooters on the market, it's certainly a good experience.

Around the edges of Uncharted 3, there's the vague sense that things are a bit too pat, that it's all beginning to feel a little formulaic. You could draw comparisons to Call of Duty, another series that relies heavily on high production values and popcorn-movie bombast. However, Uncharted 3 still affects me, not only because it's such sublime fun, but because it's telling the tale of characters I have a real affection for. In the end, you hope Drake makes it out of his latest impossible predicament, that Sully lives to deliver another wry one-liner, and that maybe – just maybe – Drake and Elena will finally settle down. Uncharted 3 is one of the biggest, most impressive games ever made, but the scene that stuck with me the most was a small one: a tired Drake resting his head on Elena's lap and saying, "I'm sorry." » Matt Helgeson



Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

This is one for all the fans of co-op platforming

8.75

PS3

» **Concept**
Spread the joy of the renowned action/platform series to four players

» **Graphics**
Environments are huge, whimsical, and colorful. The cinematics continue Insomniac's legacy of animated film-like quality

» **Sound**
Banter between characters is consistently hilarious and every sound effect fits the light-hearted sci-fi tone

» **Playability**
The controls are reliable in both solo and co-op play whether you're blasting nasty robots or leaping across chasms

» **Entertainment**
The humorous situations and vast weapon selection keeps things fresh. Gallivanting across the galaxy with three friends can't be beat

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



gamefan SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Platform (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Insomniac Games **Release** October 18 **ESRB** E10+

Co-op is king in this generation of video games. We've spent many gleeful hours alongside friends aerating zombies, enemy soldiers, and alien invaders in myriad first-person shooters. While face-shooting is entertaining, sometimes we want a break from all the gritty violence. Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One lets us continue shooting stuff with our friends while delivering gorgeous cartoony visuals, inventive weaponry, manic gameplay switch-ups, and more witty dialogue than you can shake an OmniWrench at.

The story picks up with the bumbling President Quark preparing an acceptance speech for his Intergalactic Tool of Justice Award. Things go sour when recurring bad guy Dr. Nefarious attempts to take out Ratchet and the crew. Things go from bad to worse when a malevolent force called The Collector interrupts Nefarious' attack by unleashing a monstrous beast on the city. The four dubious partners must put aside their differences to fight the rampaging monster, discover why The Collector is systematically harvesting creatures around the galaxy, and put an end to it. All 4 One's story sports all the lighthearted and fast-paced action fans of *The Incredibles* and other CG masterpieces have come to love. Don't let the new co-op features cause any doubts: This is another full-fledged Ratchet & Clank experience.

The characters and their interactions are another part of what makes this entry so charming. At one point the gang and a gigantic robot companion infiltrate a secured compound. When the robot uses his big metal hand to cover the jumbo-sized keypad while entering the passcode, he glares at the quartet as he punches in the last digit. I'll also never forget the one-liners of robo-mercenary Mr. Zircon, who shouts in monotone, "Mr. Zircon does not require bolts, his only currency is pain." The dialogue and absurd situations had me snickering consistently throughout.

Mr. Zircon is just one of many inventive tools of destruction at your disposal in All 4 One. Cycling through crazy weaponry has always been a highlight of the series, and the hijinks only become more rewarding with friends. For instance, one player can stun an enemy with an electric whip while the others scorch it with flamethrowers. Everyone's fire rate increases as players bombard foes with the same weaponry, which culminates in a satisfying slow-mo explosion. Experimenting with Insomniac's wacky weapons and discovering which combinations work best together is an enthralling game in and of itself. Though I'm fond of the trusty Combustor rifle, I rarely left the barrel of any gun cool for too long.

All 4 One's variety is represented by more than just a diverse weapon set. You can barely adventure fifteen minutes without encountering a new enemy type or gameplay mechanic. I loved waterskiing ahead of a giant killer fish's snapping maw – a battle that concludes with an electric coup de grace atop a lighthouse. I also enjoyed working as a team to guide a glowing power crystal through a dark forest to keep carnivorous plants at bay. Cooperating with friends to steer a raft down a river or pilot a hover car through a bustling city is a hilarious exercise in democratic gameplay. If you're the lone wolf type, a brilliant AI partner makes for a fulfilling single-player experience. I marveled at how effectively my computer-controlled helper dispatched enemies and aided in puzzle-solving. If you need to pass Clank a key to open a door, he'll be on the opposite end of a chasm waiting to catch it without missing a beat.

Despite my appreciation of the game, a few odd choices in the drop-in/drop-out co-op hold back the game from achieving nirvana. Progress can only be saved to the console-owner's profile, so all those hard-earned bolts and weapons your friends earned playing locally will be lost when they drop out. If buddies decide to join your game in later acts, they begin with a measly peashooter. Though bolts are plentiful late in the game, new local players have to endure countless deaths before amassing an adequate arsenal. This presents a frustrating conundrum – the game shines brightest when played on a couch with friends, but unless you plan on one 12-hour marathon session, your buddies will have to start from scratch next time. The only way for everyone to save their gear is to play on independent profiles online, which removes the joy of playing side by side. These qualms aren't dealbreakers, but gamers without a healthy reserve of patience should consider them.

All 4 One's insane amount of variety will satisfy both fans of the series and gamers interested in a change of pace. The game's sense of humor alone is sufficient grounds for recommendation. Insomniac's latest cooperative treat is a breath of fresh air. » **Tim Turi**

A Contained Conundrum?

We spoke with Insomniac Games about the issues we encountered saving the progress of our local co-op buddies. A representative confirmed that this is a rare bug and that your allies should retain their bolts and weapons after quitting. Insomniac is working on a patch so that similarly affected Ratchet fans can hang on to their loot

Forza Motorsport 4

A finely tuned racing machine



9.25

360

» **Concept**
Marry excellent racing with a comprehensive and exciting career system that will keep you engaged from 0 to 60

» **Graphics**
The cars, the showroom presentation of Autovista mode, the scenery backdrops, and the dawn to dusk lighting make Forza 4 look gorgeous

» **Sound**
The announcers liven up the World Tour menus and Autovista mode, but the menu sounds and generic music unnecessarily mimic the Gran Turismo series

» **Playability**
Forza 4's variety of cars control great. However, the Kinect integration isn't worth the bother – not even the headtracking

» **Entertainment**
Forza 4 achieves what developer Turn 10 has been striving for in previous iterations

» **Replay Value**
High

gamefarmer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Games **Developer** Turn 10 Studios **Release** October 11 **ESRB** E

You can increase the performance of your car by doing something as drastic as putting in a new engine or as minute as changing your exhaust. Like other racing franchises, Forza Motorsport is faced with the daunting task of trying to wring every bit of speed out of a familiar formula – race, win, and repeat. The changes in it I find most exciting don't alter this setup dramatically, and yet with just a few tweaks it feels like a fresh experience. Forza 4 is re-invigorated, and every turn is infectious and alluring.

Much like last year, you can go through Forza's career mode by either choosing races specifically laid out before you or picking from the all-encompassing Events List. The difference is that in Forza 4 the races you choose for your career path are specifically designed around whatever car you've selected from your garage. This lets you steer the career mode to your liking even more. Don't like the races before you? Change your car and new options will conform to your choice. Unlike most racing titles, which cement how you progress, this lets you choose between investing in one car and upgrading its car class or sample from the many cars you've unlocked through the game's very generous leveling system. Letting you pick from rewards like increased driver XP, manufacturer affinity XP, or a random payout is also a nice way to customize your ascension. Creating your career path in these ways is great, and the fact that the game still takes you around the globe in a set order of locations (nicely introduced by an announcer) – while changing the specific tracks at those locations – paces the mode, provides interest, and avoids track replication.

Forza 4's refined career structure is reinforced by a badge and title system that rewards you for achievements in the game ranging from reaching career milestones to good racing, which is monitored by performing Race Feats. These are things like passing and taking turns correctly, drifting, drafting, etc. Badges and titles you win can be put on your online profile. In fact, the game's seamless transition between online and offline is a powerful motivator to experience all aspects of Forza 4. Whether you're creating rivals through the endless list of challenge races, sharing the cars you won offline with your online car club members, or simply earning credits through online races that you can spend on cars for your career mode, the game feels like so much more than a list of cars and tracks.

Forza 4's actual racing is no less impressive than how the game itself is structured. The wide variety of car types feel distinct from each other, the tracks and background environments look fabulous, and the driving itself is demanding and really conveys a rush of adrenaline. My favorite race is the Fujimi Kaido mountain track. As you navigate the tight switchbacks, altitude changes, and car traffic with Mt. Fuji in the background, it's easy to lose yourself in the moment. Fujimi Kaido's one-on-one races highlight some of the different racing disciplines that keep the game fresh. Similarly, drag racing, the Top Gear bowling pin challenges, the technical Autocross cone obstacle courses, and multi-class car races (where both high- and low-end cars race amongst each other simultaneously on the same track) – as well as various online modes like Tag or the team-based Cat and Mouse – give you lots of options.

Racing games have always strived to strike that balance between being a virtual showroom for car lovers (see the well-done and informative Autovista mode for that) and actually being fun, compelling experiences. Forza 4 successfully bridges this gap and is the racer you've been waiting for. » **Matthew Kato**



Forget About Kinect

I wasn't impressed by the Kinect integration with the game. Autovista mode is cool, but navigating through it with the peripheral just meant it took me longer to get the information I was looking for. Racing with it is confined to its own mode and it isn't satisfying since your arms get tired and the game controls the gas and brake for you. At least, driving with the peripheral teaches you not to make wild movements with the steering wheel. Finally, the vaunted (and optional) headtracking isn't useful since having to turn your whole head to move the camera around the cockpit means you can only look at the TV with your peripheral vision.

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

The Wii better be worth it for this one!

10

Wii

» Concept
Implement Wii MotionPlus in the first Zelda game designed from the ground up for Nintendo's flagging system

» Graphics
As much as I can't wait to see how Zelda looks in HD, this colorful art style works well with the Wii's limited power

» Sound
Limited grunts and singing noises from NPCs come off as goofy, but the orchestrated music is beautiful and nuanced

» Playability
Skyward Sword uses motion controls to the fullest extent and proves that you can include them in a hardcore game without all the gimmickry

» Entertainment
A lengthy and well-paced main quest, tons of side missions, and surprisingly challenging post-game content adds up to the best possible Wii swan song we could have hoped for

» Replay Value
High



gamefarmer GAME of the MONTH gamefarmer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo
Release November 20 **ESRB** E10+

I remember the rush of excitement the first time Nintendo unveiled the Wii's motion controllers. The upcoming system was still called the Revolution back then, and the name seemed well-suited. My mind flooded with visions of how I would use the insane new controller in the future: shooting down opponents with pinpoint accuracy, swinging my sword like a skilled blademaster, jumping with controller in hand as an on-screen Mario does the same – who knows what else? It was a strange, risky move for Nintendo, but the publisher had my implicit trust. I believed Nintendo would figure it out.

Sadly, the revolution never really materialized. Nintendo and a few other publishers released plenty of excellent titles throughout the Wii's lifespan, but the majority of them could have been done just as well with a regular controller. As what's likely to be the last major Wii release from Nintendo, Skyward Sword is a fitting finale for the console. This is the first game I've played that delivers on the promise sparked by that initial Wii remote showing.

Skyward Sword's combat and puzzle-solving rise above the majority of Wii releases (and even most recent Zelda games) thanks to the clever and challenging implementation of motion controls. Most Zelda titles have simplistic combat where mashing a single button turns into a frenzy of flourish-filled combos. Skyward Sword demands a much higher level of patience and mastery. The direction you swing the Wii remote directly correlates to the angle the sword slices in-game, and enemies are smart and fast enough to block incoming attacks.

I had concerns that carefully plotting my attacks for every swing would get boring or frustrating, but the opposite was true. I've never felt as engaged or interested in the combat portion of a Zelda game as with Skyward Sword. If you run into a group of enemies waggling the Wii remote like a madman, you will be torn to shreds. Success in swordplay depends on studying opponents' moves and attacking at the right time and from the right angle. When the correct method to defeat each foe finally clicked, I felt a sense of satisfaction that repeatedly tapping the A button never provided.

This impressive combat system leads to some of the most interesting boss battles in the series' history. Whether you're fighting a giant scorpion or a sword-swinging robot, Skyward Sword rarely falls back on the formula of using a tool to knock out the boss and then attacking it three times in a row. You need to be much smarter and much more persistent to best these bad guys. In fact, the last two boss encounters are the most difficult fights in any Zelda game thus far.

Motion controls are used for plenty more than

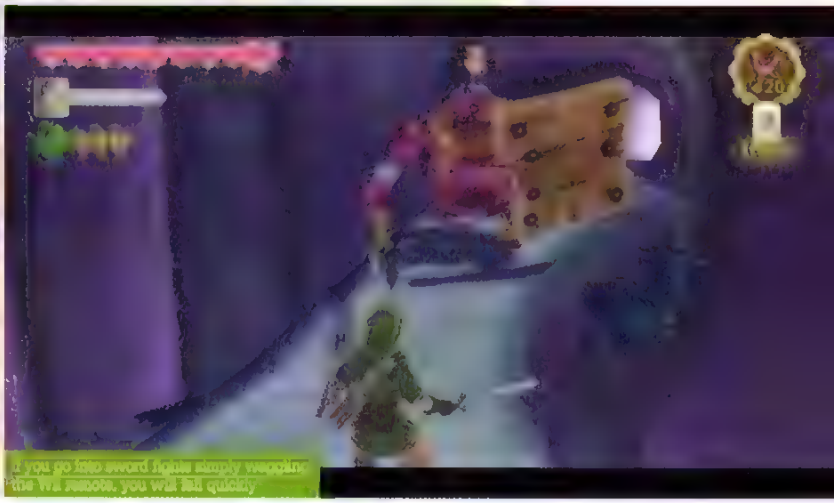



Actions like pulling switches with the whip feel great with the Wii MotionPlus enhanced remote.



Skyward Sword features some of the toughest boss fights in any Zelda game.





If you go into sword fights simply waggling the Wii remote, you will fail quickly.

sword swinging. Free falling as Link, controlling a mechanical beetle, aiming shots from the bow – virtually every action can be controlled via motion. I'm still shocked that Nintendo crammed so many varied uses of the Wii remote into the game without it coming off as a series of tacked-on minigames. Whether rolling a bomb along the ground like a bowling ball or pulling a switch down using the new whip item, the motion controls feel natural and rewarding.

The biggest surprise in Skyward Sword is the story. For all the different shapes it has taken, the plot of The Legend of Zelda has always been a fairly predictable affair that feels like an afterthought. Skyward Sword doesn't elevate the art of video game storytelling, but it is a major step up for the franchise, with clever writing, an interesting (if strange) new villain, and a wide cast of characters that would feel at home in one of Disney's better animated movies.

The first third of the game feels like a traditional Zelda tale – with Link rushing off to save the damsel in distress – but some twists send the plot in surprising directions that kept me uncertain of what to expect. As I approached the game's end, it did the unthinkable: It made me actually care about the characters. I won't spoil what happens, but I don't think the full story arc of a Zelda game has ever been as emotionally effective as Skyward Sword.

Despite my love for it, I can recognize a few elements of this latest Zelda adventure that some gamers are going to dislike. The much-vaunted Skyloft proves to be a fascinating starting locale with tons of sidequests and secrets to discover, but flying to different floating islands takes a bit of time. It's much faster and generally less annoying Wind Waker's sailing, but there were times where the pull of my next objective was so strong that I would have gladly accepted a fast warp to that location.

The vast, open Hyrule Field is replaced by tinier, more disconnected, and more puzzle-centric ground areas leading up to dungeons. Although Skyward Sword is lengthy – my first playthrough took just over 40 hours – the physical size of the game world is smaller than Twilight Princess. As such, the game occasionally tasks you with backtracking through areas you've already completed while on fetch quests, but it usually changes the environment in interesting ways or throws out new challenges. I never felt cheated by the repeat levels; if nothing else, they are a great opportunity to collect bugs and enemy drops, materials that are used in the game's new simple-but-fun upgrade system.

Nintendo has talked about Skyward Sword as the title that shows how Zelda can evolve, and as a lifelong fan of this franchise, I feel confident saying that the game does just that. From a gameplay and story standpoint, this is the biggest shift the series has ever seen, grafting remarkably fresh additions onto the classic structure.

Any minor issues I had with Skyward Sword pale in comparison to the game's massive and undeniable achievements. It releases almost exactly five years after the launch of the Wii. Nintendo took a long time, but the publisher has finally proven that it's possible to build a great, hardcore-friendly gaming experience around motion controls – something that's fun and challenging without feeling frustrating or silly. That fact alone makes Skyward Sword a title that every gamer should experience. » **Phil Kollar**

Super Mario 3D Land

Mario returns to rescue the princess...and the 3DS

9.5

3DS

» **Concept**
Form a hybrid of Super Mario Galaxy and New Super Mario Bros. and sprinkle in a bunch of classic references to Super Mario 3

» **Graphics**
Mario and company look great, and little flourishes like light beams piercing the water bring a bit of realism to the cartoony world

» **Sound**
Tons of remixes of your favorite Mario tunes blend well with the new tracks

» **Playability**
The circle pad feels like it was custom built to control Mario, and the camera is always right where it needs to be

» **Entertainment**
The 3DS finally has its first must-have, all-original game

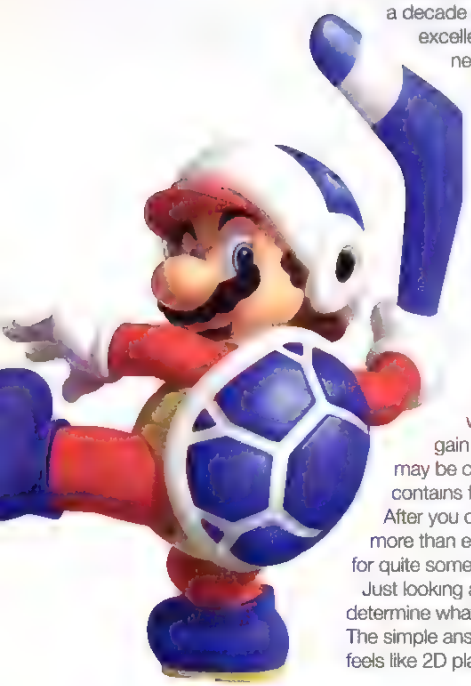
» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



GAMEINFORMER GOLD

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** November 13 **ESRB** E

The 3DS has a couple of great games from Nintendo. The problem is that they're remakes of N64 titles. Gamers were glad to experience classics like The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time and Star Fox 64, but no one buys a new system to play games over a decade old. That all changes with the excellent Super Mario 3D Land, an all-new adventure in the Mushroom Kingdom – that mixes in plenty of entertaining references to Mario's back catalog.



3D Land takes level progression all the way back to the original Super Mario Bros., with eight linear worlds to beat one by one. Every stage ends with Mario jumping onto a flagpole, and when he takes damage he shrinks down rather than losing a slice of pie from a circular health bar. All levels include three hidden star coins to collect, which you'll eventually spend to gain access to later areas. At first you may be concerned that each world only contains five or six levels, but don't worry. After you complete the main career, there's more than enough content to keep you busy for quite some time.

Just looking at screenshots, it can be tough to determine what kind of platformer 3D Land is. The simple answer? All of them. Sometimes it feels like 2D platformer New Super Mario Bros. Other times the camera will follow behind you like Mario 64 or Galaxy. You'll also see isometric views and a top-down perspective inspired by classic Zelda games. The camera often changes multiple times during a single level, but it's done so smoothly that you'll hardly notice. I always felt like I was in complete control of Mario no matter what the theme of the level, and the camera is always in the perfect spot for the situation.

The controls are spot-on and easy to pick up right away. I initially questioned why 3D Land needs a run button in addition to the analog controls of the circle pad, but I was thankful during later tricky sections that require a deft touch. I eventually played 3D Land like a 2D Mario game, with my thumb covering both the run and jump buttons. The left shoulder button rounds out the arsenal making Mario crouch so that he can get into small tunnels and toggle long and high jumps.

Power-ups blend the classics in with a few new ones. Fireballs provide an offensive boost while the Tanooki Suit (not seen since Super Mario 3) grants an infinitely useful floating ability that'll help you past more difficult areas. You can store an extra power-up on the lower touchscreen and tap it anytime to access it. The old item then goes down to the bottom screen so you can easily toggle back and forth between the two. The new boomerang ability fits right in with these classics, and you can purposely dodge the returning projectile to keep it flying around and destroying enemies. Mario can also climb inside propeller blocks for some extra vertical flying power similarly to the propeller helmets from New Super Mario Bros.

The level designs are as clever as ever, and provide plenty of new Mario memories. You stomp koopas in green fields, walk along tightropes, hit the gas on a controllable platform, and swim away from a giant sea serpent. I loved navigating the many ominous airships and taking down Bowser by running under his jump and hitting a switch to make him fall into hot lava just like in the first game. Few things are more satisfying than crushing a goomba underfoot after falling several hundred feet.

What surprises me most about 3D Land is how well the 3D effect is handled. I kept the 3D slider up most of the game, since the levels pop to life with added depth and plenty of effects. Massive spike pillars thrust toward the screen on airships, Mario looks like he's swimming around in a tiny handheld fish tank during underwater scenes, and the heights feel even more staggering when you have to jump off a massive cliff and navigate small platforms on the way to the flagpole far below. Rest your arms on a table to keep the 3D screen in the sweet spot and you won't be disappointed.

Super Mario 3D Land isn't perfect, but the few complaints I have (like the lack of variety in boss fights and some re-hashed levels) can't bring down this entertaining mix of nostalgia and innovation. It lives up to the level of quality set by previous entries and is easily the best reason to own a 3DS. » **Bryan Vore**



Solatorobo: Red the Hunter

A vibrant fantasy – of dogs

Style 1-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Online)
Publisher XSEED **Developer** CyberConnect2
Release September 27 **ESRB** E10+

7.5

DS

» Concept
Journey through a creative fantasyland of sentient dogs, floating islands, and ancient magic

» Graphics
Anime influences abound in the colorful, well-animated world

» Sound
Inoffensive and forgettable jaunty tunes are par for the JRPG course

» Playability
Extremely simple controls, upgrade mechanics, and battles make it easy for anyone to succeed

» Entertainment
A good introductory RPG with lots of characters and variety, but too simplistic for most experienced gamers

» Replay Value
Moderately Low

This is the best game about anthropomorphic sky pirate dogs that ride robots I've ever played. Joking aside, Solatorobo is a unique, lovingly crafted game stuffed with interesting ideas. The mysterious world of floating islands is beautiful, and the colorful tale feels like something out of a Disney movie. I just wish the developer had more faith in its players; the gameplay is simplistic and threatens dullness, even as the guileless characters are too endearing to dislike.

Solatorobo's predictable but heartfelt story requires a lot of text reading, so patience for exposition is a must. The canine protagonist, Red, is a carefree adventurer who travels the skies picking up odd jobs to keep him and his lovable sister running free. A chance encounter with a mystical artifact forces Red to grow up and accept a deeper destiny. Riding his trusty robot, Red has to face danger for the sake of those he cares about, and eventually save the world. I don't want to ruin anything, but there may be a character that you think is a boy who turns out...well, I just can't bear to ruin the surprise.

For all the simple narrative devices at play, Solatorobo's charming world combines technology and magic into a whole that feels believable and vibrant. Each island has a unique visual style, from a junkheap of floating shipwrecks to a forest of giant mushrooms populated by carnivorous plants. The fictional backdrop grows over the course of the game to match the increasing gravity of the conflict.

I wish I could heap such glowing praise on the gameplay. The action isn't fundamentally bad or broken; it's just shallow. Solatorobo's combat system is built around picking stuff up and throwing it. That's it. In most situations, the arena-style battles focus on maneuvering behind the bad guys, or catching and throwing back missiles they send your way. Occasional puzzles pop up, but they stretch the meaning of the word. Is it really puzzling to move a box to a glowing circle on the other side of the room?

Numerous minigames and side activities are equally straightforward, from a button-mashing fishing game to mine cart obstacle courses. Even though these extra activities aren't amazing, the sheer variety of minigames, collectibles, and locations saves the game from tedium.

One of these activities, flight racing, extends itself into a four-player multiplayer mode. Several courses and ships unlock for use in this mode, but the flight controls are choppy and stiff, so it's difficult to recommend spending time racing your friends.

I can't marshal too much frustration at Solatotobo, even if I'm bothered by its overly simplistic mechanics. It's a fun introductory action/RPG, but experienced players should consider a more sophisticated title. That is, unless you love your game heroes to be covered in fur. **» Matt Miller**

Kirby's Return To Dream Land

Classic Kirby gameplay meets great co-op in this amusing return to form



Style 1-4 Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo
gamefarmer SILVER
Developer HAL Laboratory
Release October 24 **ESRB** E10+

8.5

Wii

» Concept
Team Kirby with unlikely allies and reintroduce classic gameplay elements

» Graphics
Characters and animations are solid, but the game doesn't feature the striking aesthetic of Epic Yarn or Donkey Kong Country Returns

» Sound
Longtime fans of Kirby will feel right at home with these revisited, cheery tunes

» Playability
Fantastic co-op integration and the slower pace help avoid the four-player chaos seen in New Super Mario Bros. Wii

» Entertainment
A solid and nostalgic experience regardless of player count

» Replay Value
Moderately High

In the past year, Nintendo has released three decidedly different Kirby experiences. Epic Yarn is a charming yet consequence-free Wii platformer, and Mass Attack is a solid DS entry with some similarities to Pikmin. Both games were well received, but neither is reminiscent of classic Kirby gameplay. With Kirby's Return To Dream Land, the pink puffball is back in the form(s) that made him famous. It's classic Dream Land gameplay, with our hero inhaling enemies to gain their various powers. Revisiting these classic mechanics is great for nostalgic purposes, but it's the four-player co-op integration that breathes new life into the formula.

Possibly inspired by the success of New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Kirby's Return To Dream Land features a remarkably simple method for friends to join the fun. If you're playing single-player, friends can hop in and out with the press of a button. No menus, no "we'll get you in once I get back to the world map" – just press a button and select your character. As I reviewed the game, a steady stream of editors kept jumping in for a level or two throughout my sessions. The ease of joining and leaving is better than any I've seen in a co-op game. My only complaint regarding co-op play is the way lives are handled. If anyone but player one dies, their lives are subtracted from a shared pool. However, all four players will be sent back to the last checkpoint if player one dies, regardless of how many shared lives the group has. If you don't want your entire team to suffer thanks to this questionable system, you'll want to make sure player one isn't prone to frequent deaths.

Return To Dream Land is a blast with friends, but it's also worth playing solo. Each level features a set amount of energy spheres (there are 120 total), and collecting these unlocks new single-player challenge levels and entertaining multiplayer minigames. Completing most of the levels isn't terribly challenging, but finding all of the energy spheres is a worthy challenge for completionists.

Each of the four characters (Kirby, Meta Knight, King Dedede, and Waddle Dee) has his own control scheme and attacks, but Kirby is the only one able to assume enemy forms. Many enemies give Kirby powers previously introduced in the series, but the new ultra attacks are satisfying screen-clearing ordeals.

While it doesn't have the challenge of Donkey Kong Country Returns or the charming art style of Kirby Epic Yarn, Kirby's Return To Dream Land is another formidable entry in a line of great side-scrolling Wii platformers. **» Dan Ryckert**

Professor Layton and the Last Specter

Another quality adventure along an RPG apprentice

8.5

DS

» **Concept**
Start a prequel Layton trilogy accessible to anyone

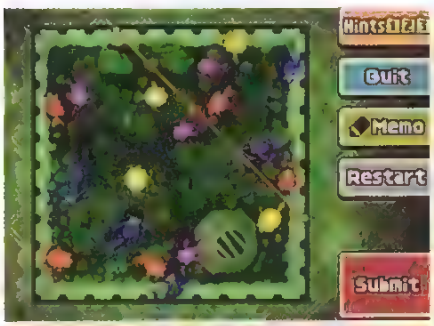
» **Graphics**
The trademark hand-drawn look returns alongside the new pixelated design of London Life

» **Sound**
The accordion and quality voice acting return

» **Playability**
Mashing the screen in search of hint coins works the same as always

» **Entertainment**
One of the better Layton stories meets a surprisingly deep bonus game

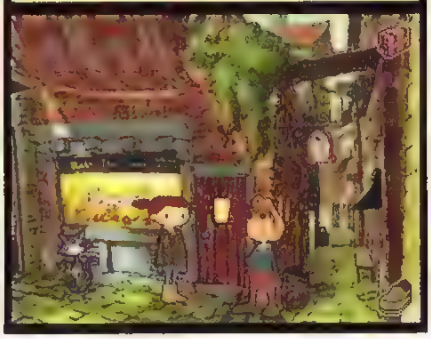
» **Replay Value**
Moderately High













gamerinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Puzzle/Adventure Publisher Nintendo Developer Level-5 Release October 17 ESRB E10+

When gamers talk about the Professor Layton series, most have played a game or two in the series, but few have made it through the entire trilogy. Level-5 wisely steered the fourth game in the series back to the time when Layton and his apprentice first met, kicking off a new prequel trilogy. This way new players can jump in without feeling lost and veteran players can skip any missed entries without the guilt.

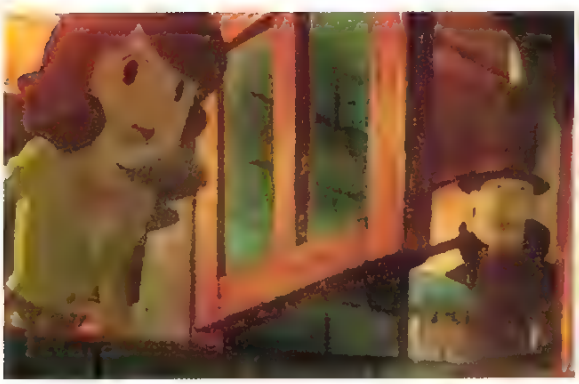
This time around, the professor heads to the town of Misthallery with his original puzzle-solving apprentice, Emmy Altava. It's nice to see him run around with another capable adult, and when they team with Luke, it creates an entertaining rivalry. Interesting new characters abound, like the he-man policeman Grosky and the strange hide-and-seek enthusiast Goosey. While the story isn't quite as good as the excellent Unwound Future, it still hits all the right beats and knows how to tug at the heartstrings at the end.

Most of the mechanics remain unchanged from the advances made in the last game. This is fine by me, since those changes addressed a lot of my previous complaints. You'll recognize a lot of the same puzzle types from previous entries like block sliding, tracing tangled wires, and basic geometry. I suppose it's not easy to create the 155 in-campaign puzzles from scratch, but I'd take fewer puzzles for a little more innovation.

What really sets Last Specter apart from previous entries is the impressive all-new London Life bonus game, which is playable right away. It's touted as a 100-hour RPG, but this is more Animal Crossing than Final Fantasy. You create your own avatar and then ride in on the Molentary Express to Little London, a Disneyland-style mash-up of all four Layton games' characters and locations.

The small city grid (spanning approximately five blocks) is the primary location, with a couple side areas to explore. London Life is all about running errands for people, buying new clothes, and decorating your place. To earn some extra scratch, you can wander around town and pick up trash for city hall, participate in a juggling minigame in the park, and several other activities. The game frames the main point as a choice between money and happiness, but I was happy to discover that you can get plenty of both in no time flat as long as you check the newspaper for quests every in-game morning.

Going into London Life, I had hoped to hoof it from town to town with Layton and Luke, clearing out dungeons in turn-based battles along the way. Now that I've played the real thing, I understand why this direction was chosen. There is very little fighting in the Layton series; it's more about walking around and talking to people. This ends up being a charming way to revisit a pixelated version of the Layton world for fans and it's the best bonus content the series has ever had. Once you've solved all the puzzles in a normal Layton game, there's very little reason to put the cart back into your DS. London Life will ensure plenty of gameplay to bridge the gap to the next 3DS Layton chapter. » **Bryan Vore**







Might & Magic Heroes VI

Redesigned yet familiar, Ubi's new strategy doesn't disappoint

Style 1 to 8-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Black Hole Entertainment **Release** October 13 **ESRB** T

8.25

PC

» **Concept**
Take another stab at reinventing the classic series to fit into Ubisoft's new Might & Magic continuity, such as it is

» **Graphics**
The environments are gorgeous, but why the camera insists on zooming in on low-detail models is beyond me

» **Sound**
Themes repeat too often and can't match Heroes III's epic operas, but there are some nice bits to the score including some subtle, pretty piano ditties

» **Playability**
The UI is smartly designed, giving you access to the info you want without burying it under layers of menus. The terrible implementation of customizable buttons is a waste of a good idea though

» **Entertainment**
This retains some of the series' oldest flaws in AI and scenario design, but the ground-up reworking of faction troop loadouts, hero leveling, and map control is a net positive

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



The changes to the Heroes formula for this latest iteration of the strategy franchise look dramatic on paper. Zones of control on the strategic map? Wide-open hero skill trees? Just three creature tiers? *Boss fights?* Madness! After dozens of hours with the game, though, it becomes clear that the ultimate effect of all of these departures is remarkably small. Might & Magic Heroes VI is a better game than Heroes V in many respects, but for all its re-envisioned systems it's really just another title in the franchise for better and for worse. Don't worry if you haven't played the other five games, though – this is as fine a time to jump into the series as any.

The lowest-level building blocks of the game are intact: a strategic map with neutral armies guarding towns, forts, mines, artifacts, and treasure; tactical combat with stacks of creatures beating on each other while heroes fling powerful magic and abilities around the battlefield, and heroes growing to godlike power by leveling up and collecting items. I quickly fell back into the comfortable rhythms of building up my cities every day, recruiting troops out of them each week, and defending my empire from biweekly enemy incursions while conquering new territory as quickly as possible.

The turn-based tactical battles are familiar as well, even if the troops are the biggest departure from Heroes canon in franchise history. I appreciate the many unit abilities that shake up combat, like the Kenshi's challenge that dramatically reduces an enemy stack's damage against anything except for the Kenshi. Heroes VI emphasizes healing and resurrection to a much greater degree than previous games while moving away from dominating ranged units, so you can still minimize attrition while mixing it up in melee. The wide variety of unit and hero abilities makes as much tactical space to experiment with as the series has ever had.

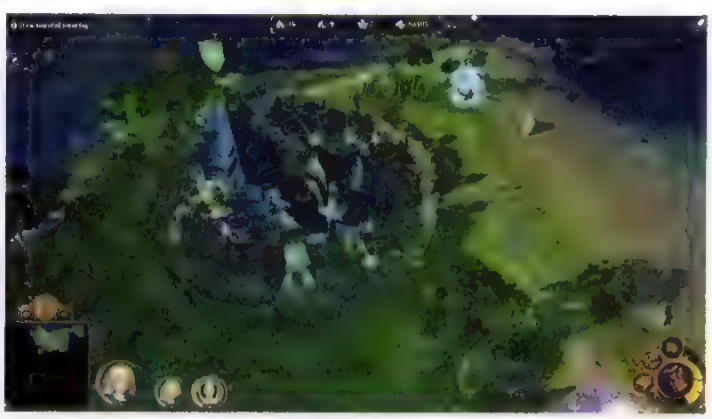
The 14 skirmish maps that come with Heroes VI are well-crafted, but the number feels low to me. Fourteen maps isn't that much, especially with lackluster multiplayer support – no simultaneous turns is a dealbreaker for me. I would have liked more options to customize the difficulty, as it's hard to find a sweet spot that's winnable without being a pushover, but that's not out of line with the franchise. The AI retains many of its foibles and cheats from earlier games, like having automatic vision of the whole map and an easily exploited tendency to overcommit heroes to attack undefended castles far from the front line, but it's otherwise reasonably competent.

The 100 or so hours of story-driven campaigns are leagues better than Heroes V's, though they can't top the classic adventures from Heroes II and III. The writing and plots are not actively stupid, and the cutscenes are solidly mediocre instead of historically terrible. Gameplay-wise they're perfectly competent at providing a backdrop to taking your main hero from a green commander to a legendary empire-crushing general. The few times the scenarios stray from typical Heroes gameplay with unusual objectives or setups are reasonably well executed; I had a fine time diving into a necromancer's head to help her confront her personal demons (personified as armies on battlefields, of course). The scripting goes a little too far in cheating up free armies for the AI to invade you with out of thin air at times, but I was able to conquer everything coming my way without too much trouble – except for the boss fights.

Oh, the boss fights. What an awful implementation of what could have been an interesting addition to the series. These one-off encounters throw half the rules out the window and have arbitrary mechanics that force you to abandon sound tactics. Most of the time I gave up and brute forced my way through by clearing the map and then hitting the end turn button for a month to come at the boss with an absurd stack of troops.

Black Hole's redesign of several mechanics feels natural to me. They mostly boil down to reducing micromanagement without having any discernable effect on overall gameplay or strategy. Recruiting all troops in your empire from any town with the matching building just means I don't have to keep six level one heroes around to run troops. Tying mine control to forts means less running around chasing off small AI heroes, and more epic battles between fully stacked armies. Letting heroes pick their skills on level up is fantastic; it wasn't ever hard to pick which skill you wanted, and this way you don't get screwed into taking something terrible like Eagle Eye or Diplomacy on your main hero. Moving creatures to the core/elite/champion tiers instead of having six distinct levels makes everything tighter, more balanced, and accessible. Despite how radical these changes are, Heroes VI plays just like a Heroes game ought to – and I'm as big a nerd for the series as anyone.

Heroes VI isn't better than my memory of Heroes III – which is, to be fair, in my top handful of games of all time. I can't imagine going back to the older games and missing out on Black Hole's innovations, though, and Heroes VI is more than good enough in its other aspects to keep me coming back here for my Heroes fix rather than firing up the classics. The nature of the franchise itself makes Heroes VI an excellent title for gamers who don't typically spend much time in the strategy genre, and if Black Hole and Ubisoft can entice an old hand like me to stick around as well, I consider it a success. » Adam Biessener



PLAYSTATION 3

Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Bionic Commando Rearmed 2	7.25	Apr-11
Blood Drive	4.5	Jan-11
BloodRayne: Betrayal	7	Sep-11
Bodycount	5	Oct-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Bulletstorm	9.25	Apr-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Chime Super Deluxe	8	May-11
Create	5	Jan-11
Crysis 2	9	May-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
de Blob 2	8	Apr-11
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Dead Space 2	9	Feb-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Dirt 3	6.75	Jul-11
Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten	8.25	Oct-11
Dragon Age II	8.25	Apr-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Dynasty Warriors 7	6	Jun-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
Echochrome II	7.25	Feb-11
El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron	9	Sep-11
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Fight Night Champion	9	Apr-11
Fight: Lights Out, The	6.5	Jan-11
God of War: Origins Collection	9.5	Oct-11
Gran Turismo 5	9	Feb-11
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Hard Corps: Uprising	9	Feb-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	6.5	Sep-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1	5.5	Jan-11
Homefront	7	May-11
Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
Killzone 3	9	Apr-11
Knights Contract	7	Apr-11
Kung-Fu Live	6.5	Feb-11
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	8.5	May-11
LittleBigPlanet 2	9.5	Feb-11
Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Major League Baseball 2K11	8	May-11
Marvel Pinball	8.5	Jan-11
Marvel Super Hero Squad The Infinity Gauntlet	6.75	Feb-11
Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds	9.25	Mar-11
Mass Effect 2	9.5	Feb-11
Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes HD	7.75	Jun-11
Mindjack	5	Mar-11
MLB 11: The Show	9.25	Apr-11
Mortal Kombat	9.5	Jun-11
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
Nail'd	8	Jan-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11
No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise	7.75	Sep-11
Operation Flashpoint: Red River	6	Jun-11
Outland	9	Jun-11
Pac-Man Championship Edition DX	9	Jan-11
PlayStation Move Heroes	6.5	May-11
Portal 2	9.5	Jun-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11
Resistance 3	7	Oct-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rush'N Attack: Ex-Patriot	6	Mar-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Shift 2 Unleashed	8.5	May-11
Shoot, The	6	Jan-11
Slam Bolt Scrappers	7	May-11
SOCOM 4: U.S. Navy Seals	7.75	Jun-11
Spare Parts	6	Mar-11
Splatterhouse	5	Feb-11
Stacking	8.5	Mar-11
Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Swarm	7.25	Apr-11
Tales From Space: About A Blob	8.75	Apr-11
Test Drive Unlimited 2	8.5	Mar-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters	9	May-11
Time Crisis: Razing Storm	6.75	Jan-11
Top Spin 4	8.5	May-11

the score

8 | Okabu

Platform PS3 **Release** October 18 **ESRB** E

I had a lot of fun playing through Okabu's colorful worlds, and found myself grinning like an idiot at its absurdly upbeat characters and activities. For parents who are looking for a wholesome game to play with their children, Okabu is a no-brainer. Even without a kid for a sidekick, Okabu's light-hearted romp is worth a look for gamers wanting a break from more serious and demanding titles. – Jeff Marchiafava

6 | Just Dance 3

Platform 360 **Release** October 7 **ESRB** E10+

I don't think Ubisoft cares if you learn how most of these goofy moves are performed. It doesn't care you're going to feel like an idiot dancing in front of the Kinect. In fact, it's probably banking on the fact that your helter skelter gyrations will give you an adrenaline-spiked thrill. Ubisoft probably doesn't even care that you think its game is silly. Ubisoft wants you to just dance. And if that's all you care about, you might have fun. – Ben Reeves

7 | NASCAR Unleashed

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** November 1 **ESRB** E

In some ways, Activision's second NASCAR game is a lot like the first. Although kart racer NASCAR Unleashed isn't trying to replicate the sport to the extent of NASCAR The Game 2011, the outcome is similar. Unleashed delivers decent gameplay, but lacks the depth to be a quality experience. – Matthew Kato

8.25 | Guardian Heroes

Platform 360 **Release** October 12 **ESRB** T

This lost Saturn beat 'em up impresses with Street Fighter-style special moves, multiple branching paths, RPG leveling, and endearing Treasure characters. Improved presentation and online play bring things forward, but other outdated elements hold the heroes back from total greatness. – Bryan Vore

6.75 | A Game of Thrones: Genesis

Platform PC **Release** September 29 **ESRB** RP

I love seeing innovation like this, especially in a genre that can be as immobile as RTS, but between the severely lacking technical implementation, bad presentation, and unforgivable UI, it's like Cyanide was trying to make its game as impenetrable as possible. – Adam Biessener

1 | Hulk Hogan's Main Event

Platform 360 **Release** October 11 **ESRB** T

Hogan lends his orange face (and a few brief voice-overs) to this baffling product, which plays like a glorified version of "The Hokey Pokey." The best compliment I can give this atrocious title is that Kinect picks up on what you want to do some of the time, but that would be like complimenting a Mario game for recognizing that you want to jump when you press A. – Dan Ryckert

8 | House Of The Dead: Overkill Extended Cut

Platform 360 **Release** October 25 **ESRB** M

While the upgraded visuals and extended campaign are certainly appreciated, the game's selling point remains the same as its Wii counterpart: A fresh take on the light gun genre complemented by hilarious writing and non-stop action make Overkill one of the few titles worth owning a PlayStation Move for. – Jeff Marchiafava

Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trinity: Souls of Zill O'll	6	Mar-11
Tron: Evolution	4.5	Jan-11
Two Worlds II	7.75	Mar-11
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE All Stars	7.5	May-11
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11
Yar's Revenge	7.5	Apr-11
You Don't Know Jack	8	Feb-11

XBOX 360

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Adventures of Shuggy, The	8.25	Aug-11
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Banga.-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Bastion	9.25	Sep-11
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Beyond Good & Evil HD	9.25	Apr-11
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Carnival Games Monkey See, Monkey Do	5	Jun-11
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Catherine	7	Aug-11
Child of Eden	8	Jul-11
Create	5	Jan-11
Crimson Alliance	8.75	Oct-11
Crysis 2	9	May-11
Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11
DanceMasters	4	Jan-11
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Faery: Legends of Avalon	6	Feb-11
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From Dust	8.75	Sep-11
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Ilomilo	8.5	Jan-11
Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet	8	Sep-11
Islands of Wakfu	7	Jun-11
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Kinect Adventures	7.5	Jan-11
Kinect Sports	8	Jan-11
Kinectimals	8	Jan-11
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Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rush'N Attack: Ex-Patriot	6	Mar-11
Section 8: Prejudice	8	Jun-11
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Wii

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PSP

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3DS

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Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition	9	Apr-11
Tetris Axis	8	Nov-11
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 3D	5	Jun-11

10 | Batman: Arkham City

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC **Release** October 18 **ESRB** T **Issue** November '11

Arkham City not only lives up to the standards set by Arkham Asylum, it bests its predecessor in every way and stands tall as one of Batman's greatest moments.
– Andrew Reiner



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In memory of Paul Anderson

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X-COM

A series that almost wasn't

by Ben Reeves

X-COM didn't change the world. In fact, even if you were a gamer throughout the early '90s, it's possible the game flew under your radar. However, this science fiction strategy title quickly developed a cult following and is widely considered one of the best turn-based strategy titles of its era. With 2K Games' upcoming series reboot, this is the perfect time to look back at this innovative game that almost didn't see the light of day.



The Man From Nowhere

JULIAN GOLLOP HAS always been a nomad. Born in Ludhiana, India, his family moved to Yorkshire, England, when he was two – then spent a few years in Sweden before moving back to Britain. The young Julian spent several years in transition as his family moved around a number of small towns surrounding London. One of the few constants during his childhood was his love for games. "My dad was really keen on card and board games," Gollop says. "So we played a lot of games as a family, especially at Christmas."

It didn't take long before Julian was constructing his own homemade board and card games. "I was always interested in making games, even before computers came along," Gollop explains. "I saw home computers as a huge potential for making board games that had an artificial intelligence." At 17, with the help of a friend, Julian created a 4X computer game called Nebula, and he instantly knew he'd found his lifelong career.

Gollop hadn't received any schooling in computer programming; formalized computer training didn't exist back in the early '80s. Instead, the ambitious young designer learned much of what he knew about computer programming through trial and error. "I bought a book on assembly language," says Gollop, "but that was essentially my only source of reference and training, aside from a little help from friends who also had home computers." When Gollop eventually did go to college years later, he took a basic computing class and found that his self-training had been thorough. "I don't think I attended any of the lectures, but I still passed the exams."

After programming a number of strategy games published under his own start up company, Julian finally hit on a winning formula with a game called Laser Squad. The game was a futunstic strategy title about a war that erupted between Earth's interstellar colonies hundreds of years in the future.

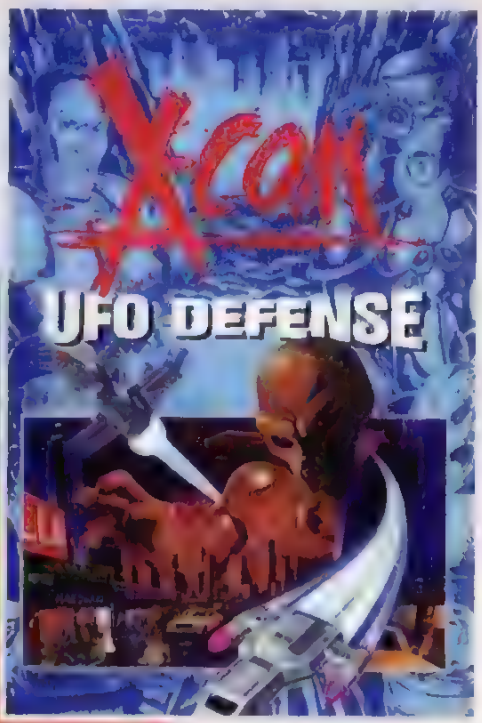
Laser Squad was heralded as inventive because it incorporated concepts like destructible terrain, hidden line of sight (enemy locations remain unknown until they fall within a character's line of sight), and opportunity fire (characters have the opportunity to fire on enemies when they come into view out of turn). These features sound mundane today – and many were pioneered by board games – but when Laser Squad released in 1988, these concepts felt entirely fresh to PC users.

Laser Squad was so successful that Julian decided to immediately start working on a sequel. Julian's brother Nick had helped port Laser Squad to the Commodore 64, so Julian asked him to stick around for the official sequel.

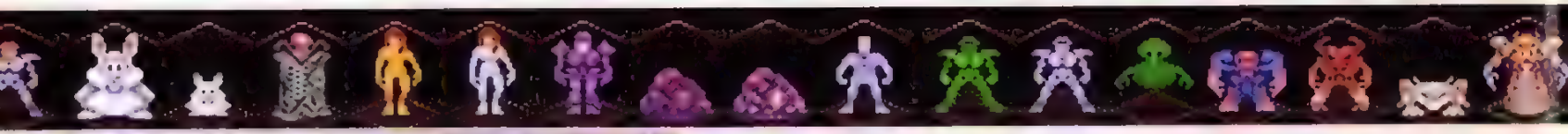
The brothers didn't know it at the time, but they were about to embark on one of the most grueling development endeavors of their lives. The results of their labor would leave an undeniable mark on the industry.

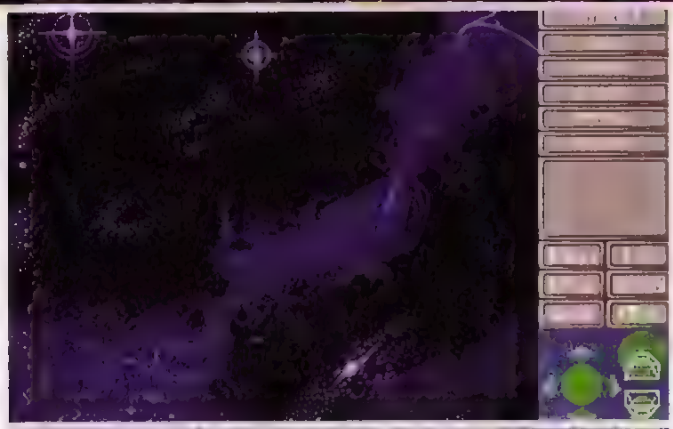
Continued on page 134





Julian Gollop was inspired to get into game design by his love for tabletop games like Squad Leader, Sniper!, and Dungeons & Dragons





Continued from page 133

Widening The Scope

LASER SQUAD HAD been successful, but the Gollops were hoping to reach a bigger audience with Laser Squad II. To do that they needed the bankroll of a big publisher. "We took a demo to three different publishers," Gollop recalls. "Microprose was our first choice, because we were such big fans of Civilization and Railroad Tycoon, which pretty much made Microprose the company for strategy games."

The Gollops took an early demo build into Microprose's UK studio, but the publisher felt like the game lacked scope. "They told us it needed to be bigger," says Julian. "They wanted a game that was more like Civilization." One Microprose executive told them that the game should revolve around a slightly less overt science fiction setting, suggesting that the brothers use an alien invasion concept to tie the game together.

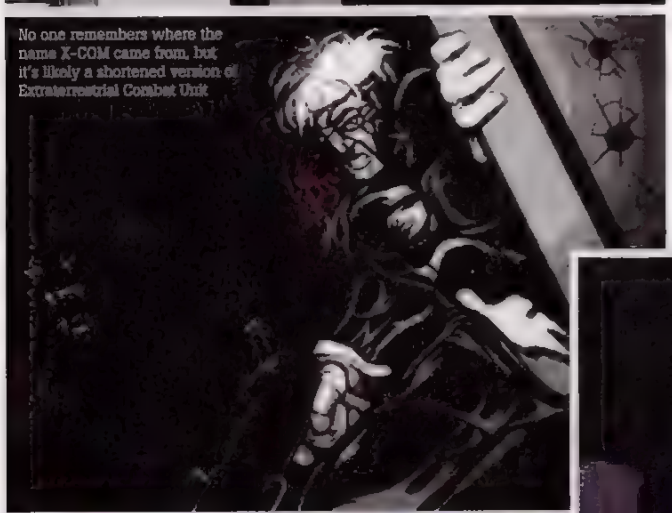
The Gollops took these ideas back to their office, and over the course of a couple weeks, began reworking their game. Julian liked the idea that aliens had secretly started invading Earth, mutilating its livestock, abducting its citizens, and manipulating the Earth's governments in a scheme to ultimately take over the planet. As he saw it, the governments of Earth would respond to these covert alien attacks by forming an elite organization that was granted ultimate authority to seek out alien threats and subdue them. Like the UN, several national governments would fund this organization, but no one would control them. This organization would be called X-COM.

The game's scope was widened to include a world map. This new top layer of gameplay gave players a global view of the Earth as they managed X-COM's network of facilities. In this mode, players not only selected which alien hotspots to investigate, they also selected where they would build new X-COM divisions, how many scientists and field agents to staff each location, and what kind of future technologies the organization would research. Players could watch their fighter pilots engage alien spacecraft through what looked like satellite imagery data. All of this was in addition to the strategic ground-based team battles. The whole game made players feel like they were powerful military generals tasked with safeguarding the planet.

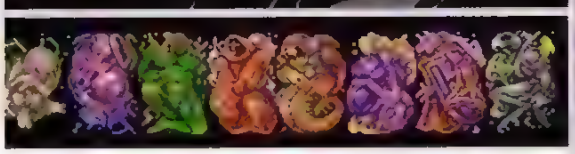
The Gollops took their reworked creation back to Microprose. "They were a little bit puzzled at first, because the game concept was relatively new, there wasn't really anything like it at the time. They didn't quite understand how the game worked," Gollop says "I remember going to a relatively big meeting with Microprose, where we had to show the game to at least ten people, including their entire design staff. There were quite a few guys there who were skeptical, but we persuaded enough people that we finally got approval."

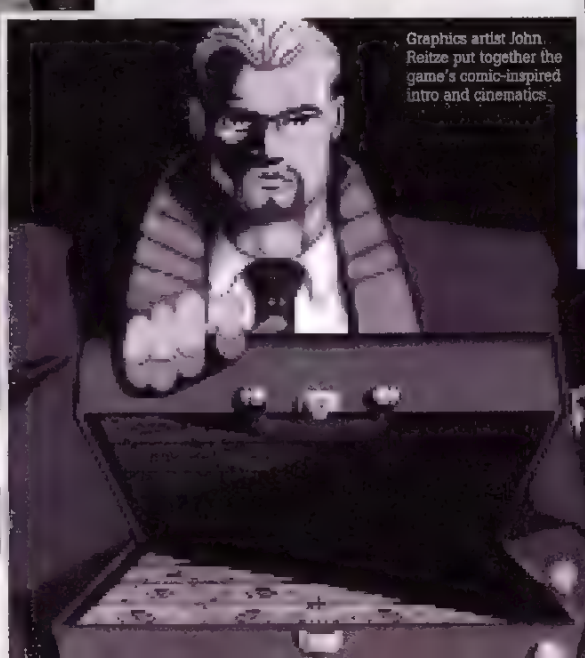
With Microprose on board, the Gollops' dream of releasing a big strategy title to a massive audience looked like a reality. The easy part was over.



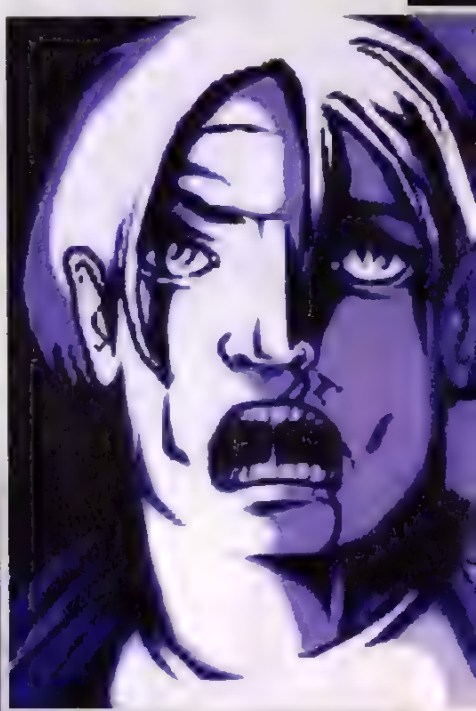


No one remembers where the name X-COM came from, but it's likely a shortened version of Extraterrestrial Combat Unit.





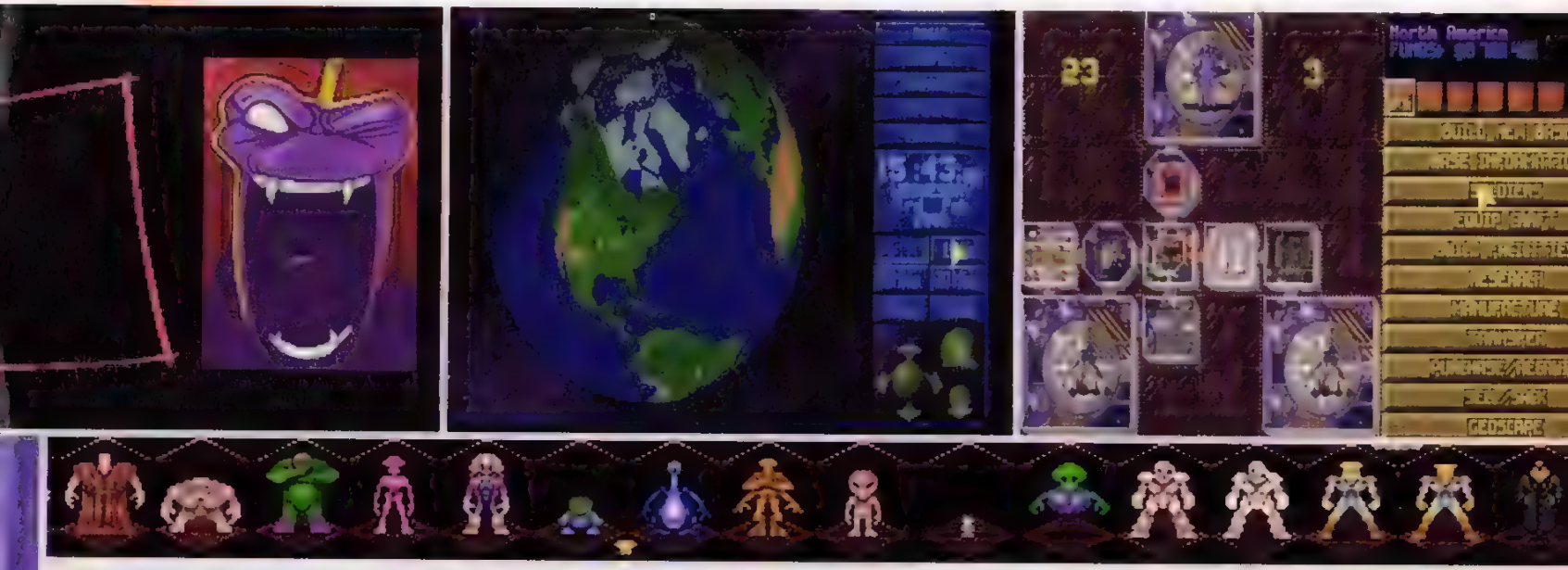
Graphics artist John Reitze put together the game's comic-inspired intro and cinematics.





"We were completely ignorant until the game shipped, but it was very nearly canceled."

– Julian Gallop



A Three-Year Ordeal

X-COM took nearly three years to develop. Even by today's standards, this is a lengthy gestation, but when you consider that the development schedule for many games during the early '90s was a little over a year, X-COM's ballooning development must have seemed unending. "Microprose was pretty hands-off during development," Gollop adds. "Looking back, it would have been better if we'd had more people working on the game. It was basically me and Nick doing all of the programming, and I was doing all of the design work." A few artists rotated through the project, and near the end a sound designer added all of the game's effects, but Gollop estimates that only about four people were working on X-COM at any given time.

Despite the game's schedule, not every idea would make it into the finished project. The men in black folklore surrounding UFO legends fascinated the Gollops, so the original design document explained how these suited government agents would be featured in the game as members of X-COM. Players could base these characters in a city and collect information about alien activity. "They were like spies," Gollop says. "But we were told to take them out because Microprose was doing their own game based on men in black. I don't know what that was, but it didn't see the light of day."

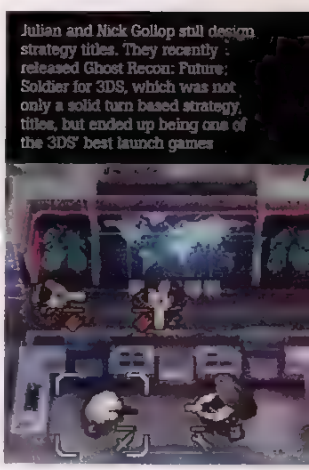
Near the end of the game, the Gollops were more concerned with finishing the game than they were adding new features. "There was a lot of pressure at the end to get things done," Gollop adds. "Microprose wanted to get the game out before the end of one of their financial quarters, so we had a nearly two month crunch period where we were working seven days a week."

The Gollop brothers were so focused on polishing the game that they were almost entirely oblivious to the internal politics going on at Microprose. Several months before X-COM was set to release, Microprose was bought out by Spectrum Holobyte, the developer of the Falcon flight simulation series. The top brass at Spectrum Holobyte was primarily interested in Microprose for its simulation games, and they were hoping to cut dead weight from their new acquisition -- a complicated sci-fi strategy title that had been in development for an extended period seemed to fit the bill.

"The game was a little too high concept for them," Gollop explains. "They didn't really understand how it worked or why anyone would be interested in it." Fortunately, X-COM had entered the QA testing rooms at Microprose and many of the testers petitioned for the game's release. "Me and Nick didn't know about any of this at the time. We were completely ignorant until the game shipped, but it was very nearly canceled."

X-COM released on PCs in 1994 and then on Sony's PSone the next year. It had strong sales in Europe and even sold well in America, which was surprising at the time, because European-developed games rarely sold well here. Microprose thought the game was such a hit that it rushed out a sequel a year later, and the Gollop brothers helped develop a more polished third titled, X-COM: Apocalypse, in 1997.

Ultimately, interest in the X-COM series suffered from a rush of sequels to the market, but the rise of the real-time strategy genre in the '90s likely diminished the fanbase of turn-based strategy titles in general. The fact that 2K Marin's upcoming XCOM title is being reinvented as a 1950s shooter could be evidence for how much the market for turn-based strategy titles has shrunk, which is sad because anyone who's played the original X-COM understands the thrill of trying to save the world from an alien invasion.



Julian and Nick Gollop still design strategy titles. They recently released Ghost Recon: Future Soldier for 3DS, which was not only a solid turn based strategy titles, but ended up being one of the 3DS' best launch games

My First Game

Harvey Smith's Technosaur







Few people wake up one morning as video game luminaries. Most of today's big-name developers break into the industry doing less exotic work than running a studio and hobnobbing with CEOs. Harvey Smith is best known as a key designer on Deus Ex, the project head of the controversial Deus Ex: Invisible War, and the co-creative director of Arkane Studios' upcoming Dishonored. Long before any of those recognizable titles appeared on his resumé, though, there was a PC RTS called Technosaur.

Before that, there were hundred-hour weeks working as a tester on such high-profile rock-star projects as the 3DO version of Wing Commander. But Technosaur is Smith's answer when asked to tell the story of his first game.

+ The name really says it all

"The gist of Technosaur was that it was an RTS. Command & Conquer wasn't out yet, and halfway through our project Warcraft came out, and I was like, 'See? These are going to be huge!' The gist of it was that it was just like an RTS, except that weather mattered, like rain would put out fires, and fires would spread, and day/night cycles. It had an XCOM-like vision model where if you weren't facing the enemy you couldn't see them, and at night the range got tighter so stealth became possible. The other thing was every unit type was only a chassis. So you could buy a unit type and put in extra armor for this cost, and so you could buy one really powerful unit with all the armor and weapon upgrades and win a mission, or you could buy 10 little cheap ones.

"You could literally buy a T-Rex and put a head-mounted rocket launcher on it and heavy-duty armor and several things like that, or you could buy five velociraptors and put silencer-equipped weapons on them and armor that reduced their visibility. And then if you factor day and night and weather into that – it was my dream game basically, because it had an environmental sim and day/night and it added some stealth."

+ Terminator + Jurassic Park = ?

"The fiction was really funny. In the future, Earth had ruined itself through ecological disaster, but the weird future Earth people – like pseudo-religious odd future humans – developed time travel and came back in time to the 20th century. So half the units were tanks and things like that, and half the units were cybernetically modified dinosaurs."

+ Extinction-level event

"We worked on it for a couple years. It was the first project that felt like mine. Both Warren Spector and Richard Garriott gave it the green light. And there was this one moment when EA swept in and killed five or six Origin projects, and that was one of them.

"It was crazy, because I had almost no experience; I didn't know what I was doing. With the right producer it would've been okay, but Warren left to go to Looking Glass at that point and so my number one mentor and ally had moved on to bigger and better things. I tried to make it work without him, and it was difficult. We really didn't have political protection within the company, I think is part of it. In any case, I totally believed in the game. I still think it would have been a very popular RTS if we had managed to finish it and polish it. But I had to watch my friends – I always work with friends; my team is made up of my friends – all but three of us got fired on the team, and I had to watch them walk with boxes down the hall because HR came and got them. Origin went through a big round of layoffs at that point, and it was apocalyptic for me. It was terrible. I immediately left Origin and left for the bay area."

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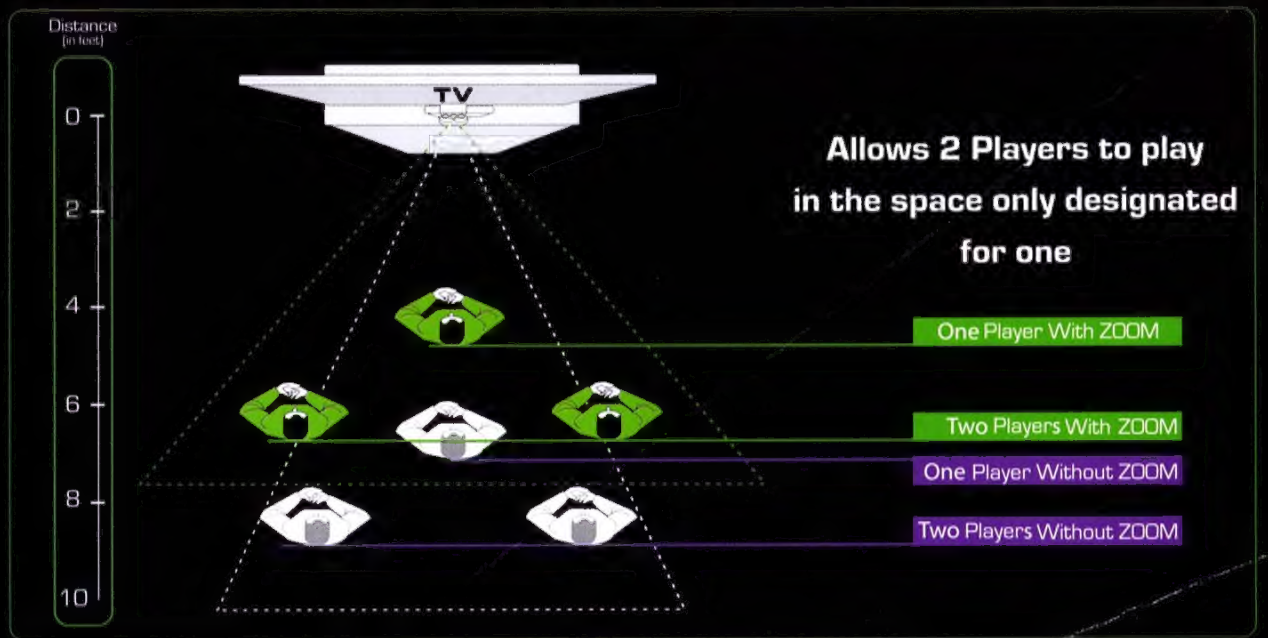
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